Leading the Blind (Astray)
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Leading the Blind (Astray)

by outrigger

Summary

Nedzu is a seeing-eye... mouse, bear, dog? It goes well for nobody!

-Or-

Nedzu has been missing for five years until he shows up on Midoriya Izuku's doorstep. A Midoriya Izuku who has recently retired as a Pro Hero due to a mysterious case of sudden blindness. Together they need to uncover a dangerous villain who operates three steps ahead. Old allies are their only chance against the corrupted future.

-Complete-

Notes

I have no idea what I'm doing, but I'm going to do it anyway, and I'm going to do my best!

This is AU. I don't read the manga (though I'm thinking i should!), not quite caught up on the anime, most of my info comes from fanfic... so let's do something different. This takes place 5 years after graduation and things have Gone Poorly. I have made an attempt to take things seriously but I am not a serious person.

I think the major points are: All for One died the first time and One for All is a non-issue. Izuku is quirkless and he became a hero anyway. Quirkless people and quirked animals are less rare, but still minority. Any other changes that are relevant will be brought up as the story goes, but otherwise imagine the cannon story beats are much the same correcting for quirkless Izuku.

Thank you for being a place I can share this nonsense.

See the end of the work for more notes

Helping

One thing Nedzu knew and kept close to his heart his whole life was this:

No matter how powerless you are, you always have a choice.

Take right now, for example. He was *choosing* not to bite his handler. When she was buckling in his seatbelt, he *chose* not to sink his teeth into her arm. While she wrestled him into a child sized t-shirt he *chose* not to claw at her hands. While they drove to his new home (assignment, cage, jail... place of indefinite detainment) he *chose* not to tear into her insecurities (flashy jewelry, but cheap, knockoff designer clothes, folder from a prestigious university she never graduated from...).

Making the right choice was hard, sometimes, but knowing that the choice was there was the only thing keeping him sane.

The other thing that helped was taking joy in the little things. Every red light, for instance, gave him a few more precious moments to observe the outside world. He hadn't had real news in... well, five years, judging by the date on his handler's phone. Hopefully that would change soon enough with unmonitored access to a computer, or at the very least his new 'client's' phone.

The collar of his shirt itched.

"Stop that," his handler said, batting his hand away before he could scratch. "You've just grown out those nasty bald patches, you wouldn't want to ruin your fine coat!" she admonished cheerily.

His coat was *not* fine; it was dry and brittle from stress (and diet).

"Such a handsome little man," she cooed, flicking her gaze at him. What she saw to fuss over he couldn't begin to imagine. He stared at her blankly. He knew his input wasn't necessary (or welcome) for her to continue her nervous small talk.

"You must be excited! You're going to be a big help to a very lucky veteran," she said. "I'm sure it will be nice to settle into a home after all the buzz of the academy."

He was pretty sure his t-shirt advertised him as a '*little* helper', the official uniform for animals (quirked or otherwise) trained to help those with a disability. The shirt was light blue and had a childish paw print on it. Until he set eyes on it he hadn't thought wearing clothes would be more humiliating than going without. But you learn something new every day!

God, he missed his suits.

More than that, he missed *tea.* He would probably make some *very incorrect* choices if it would result in him getting his mitts on some actual, *picked, dried and caffinated,* tea.

"I think you will do very nicely for Mr. Akatani. Mister Ah-Ka-Ta-Ni. He's a retired hero! He's blind now, poor dear, which means he can't see."

It is a common misconception that the people in power are there on their own merits; that because someone is in charge, they are the most capable. And, as the logic follows, if you are not in power you are somehow unfit. Defective. (Not really a person at all)

So they talked to him slowly, made aggressive eye contact, gave clear and explicit orders and he obeyed because, while he *had choices,* there were also *consequences.* They started to forget he was

once an authority they feared. They saw his short stature, his fur, his tail and skipped over his teeth and claws and intelligence. They saw exactly what they wanted to see. The worst part was that it didn't even *matter*.

"Ah, we're here!" She exclaimed as she pulled into the lot of a low rise. It was clean, but not high end. "This is really my favorite part. Introducing our clients to their new companion is what makes the whole job worth it. You're really going to make a difference to Mr. Akatani, you know."

Nedzu tugged on the belt.

"Wait, one more thing before we go up," she said, making deliberate eye contact. He chose not to bear his teeth. "While it is true that Mr. Akatani was a pro hero, he's always been a bit of a special case. On top of being blind he is also *quirkless."*

The eye contact continued.

"You will need to be *careful* with him."

Izuku approached optimism with the same aggressive energy that he brought to training, or hero work. So what if he was blind! *He still had all his limbs!* So what if he was officially retired now, *he was getting a dog!*

It wouldn't have been responsible before; he was never home. Now he had all this adjustment time to spend with it, and after that service animals could go anywhere! He would have a constant, non-judgmental companion. *No more lonely hours!*

"10AM... is here!" The little retro All Might clock helpfully announced (best purchase he'd ever made).

Any minute now! Izuku made his way to the door (only barking his shins twice, thank you very much) and waited anxiously. Outside he could hear a heavy step on the shared corridor. Should he wait for them to knock? Would it be weird to open the door now?

The doorbell buzzed.

"Coming!" He called. *Oh my god he was right there, he didn't need to say it* (they'll know he's been waiting right behind the door, his voice too close for anything else). He waited a moment regardless before twisting the knob and throwing it open.

"Hello! Mr. Akatani!" the woman said, slowly and over-loud. "I am Ms. Fukushi from Veteran Hero Affairs. It is so nice to meet you!" A hand clasps his without warning, small and warm with too many rings.

"Ah yes, Akatani Mikumo, that's me!" *quick say something normal* "It's nice to meet you Ms. Fukushi, please come in."

"Thank you, Mr Akatani," Ms Fukushi says, stepping closer. "Come along Suki, this is your new home." Izuku swore he heard a small squeak before everyone stumbled their way out of his narrow entry into the slightly more spacious living room beyond. Izuku stuck to the wall as Fukushi pushed past to the couch. A tail brushed past his legs and he reached out to touch... nothing. He recovered the motion as a grab for a nearby chair.

"You sure like heroes, don't you Mr. Akatani?" Fukushi chuckled. Izuku felt his face heat. He had almost forgotten about his décor choices.

"Ah... yeah. Gotta support my friends, you know?"

"Of course, of course! Just a... lot, don't you think?" said Fukushi.

"Uh, not really... um. Well it doesn't really matter anymore does it?" Izuku deflected, gesturing at his eyes.

"Right, it just seems like a lot of clutter? Anyway, you must be excited! I'm sorry it took so long for us to get to your assignment, but you must understand there is a wait list. We run a very popular service," said Fukushi.

"Oh no no, I understand how it is. I'm just glad you could fit me in, you know?" Izuku had never been a priority. "It's just nice that there's something like this at all. I've always wanted a dog, I just never thought it would happen quite like this." Izuku chuckled nervously.

"Dog?" Fukushi said "I guess... he could be a dog?"

What.

"Sorry, sorry," apologies were still his first reaction to anything remotely uncomfortable, "I thought that the office was sending me a dog? Like a seeing-eye service dog? Was that... was that not the case?"

Fukushi laughed.

"Oh Mr. Akatani, that might have been the original plan but upon further review of your condition it was decided that you should be fast tracked for a *quirked* service animal! To meet all your needs, you know?"

Oh. *Oh so they're giving him a person.* That's.. that's something isn't it.

Izuku's hands felt a little numb.

"Suki was it?" he forced a smile. "It's nice to meet you," he managed weakly.

"Suki dear he can't see you. You have to... oh, he nodded Mr. Akatani. I think he might just be a little shy. I'm sure you'll settle in together in no time!"

The meeting continued but he retained almost none of it past the buzzing in his ears. Before he knew it he was numbly shaking Fukushi's hand and closing the door and then sitting on the floor and staring at nothing because he couldn't actually stare at anything anymore (it was always dark and it was a heck of time to start developing a fear of the dark but Izuku had never done anything the easy way and...)

There were soft footsteps at the end of the hall, nails clicked against the hardwood. (Bipedal, Izuku thought). He didn't have time to wallow in self-pity, there was a person here who needed him to *get it together* and, you know, not make this whole... *situation...* worse.

"You must've really pissed someone off if they sent you to me," Izuku said.

The footsteps stopped.

Good *job*, Izuku.

"No wait, I... I shouldn't have said that. Um. I'm sorry for thinking you were a dog?" he tried.

There was a small sound, someone clearing their throat, and then a small high voice said, "Am I a mouse, a dog or a bear?"

"Principal Nedzu!?"

Catching Up

Chapter Summary

Nedzu and Izuku have a chat!

Chapter Notes

Exposition!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The most Nedzu had been hoping for was a couple hours unsupervised on a computer. Now, he was tucked securely in his favorite student's arms, head pressed firmly into the crook of his neck. It was surreal.

"Tell you what," he said over Midoriya's tears. "I will forgive you for everything you think you've ever done if you let me have some tea." He was rewarded with a wet chuckle.

"It's all yours, but you'll have to make it. I haven't been brave enough to touch the kettle since... all this."

"How do you survive!"

"Takeout, mostly."

"You're almost as bad as Aizawa," Nedzu chided. Midoriya's shoulders stiffened in a concerning fashion. "Tea, Midoriya," Nedzu prompted.

"Yes sir! But really you should probably stick to 'Akatani'. Secret civilian identity and all."

"Oh?"

"Few years ago my privacy got trashed. Also these walls are *thin."*

Nedzu nodded against his shoulder as Midoriya stood up. They stumbled their way into the kitchen where he set Nedzu on the counter. "I have no idea where anything is anymore, so go wild."

Well. The kitchen wasn't clean so much as it hadn't been used. There were cups and bowls pushed back against the wall, a pile of utensils in the sink. From the state of it he doubted Midoriya did much cooking even before he lost his vision. Midorya shuffled to the entry and leaned against the fridge, mostly turned in Nedzu's direction. It took a few tries but he eventually found a kettle and a stash of tea. A very familiar stash of tea.

"You have good taste," Nedzu chuckled. Midoriya flushed.

"None of the other brands taste quite right anymore."

"Glad to see I still have some influence in the world."

Midoriya sobbed out a laugh. Nedzu worked quietly for a while, filling the kettle and washing the mugs. He had expected domestic chores, but he hadn't imagined it would be so grounding. Just him and his student and the familiar ritual of tea.

While the water heated he took the time to really look Midoriya over. He'd filled out even since his school days. His shoulders were broad and muscular, thin scars crisscrossing up his arms. His skin was darker, more freckled. His hair longer and tied back. He hadn't changed his style much since school either; a mix of pro-hero merchandise and comfort. His face was that of an adult now and Nedzu can't help the swell of pride imagining him in his heroic attire at the scene of some disaster or other.

He loved it when they grew up.

Midoriya's eyes were red and puffy from crying, irritated from the wrist he kept wiping across his cheeks. There is no visible scarring on his face, but his eyes didn't focus on anything. They weren't milky or dim, they just didn't... work. It was a recent development, going by the date last marked on the calendar.

"What happened to you?" Nedzu didn't mean to ask out loud (not yet), but there it was.

"That's my line!" Midoriya choked. "Where did you go? *How are you here?"*

Nedzu scowled.

"I misjudged my enemy, so I was removed."

"But *who* removed you? Where have you *been?* We looked! For *years* we looked, Aizawa looked and now he's..." Midoriya cut out, hands going up to tug on his hair.

"Breath M.. Akatani," Nedzu said. He reached out and pat Midoriya's shoulder, eliciting a flinch. "Sorry, just breathe. Let's... I didn't mean to start this conversation yet. Let's get our tea and sit on the couch and then we'll figure it out from there."

They settled on the couch and Nedzu took a moment to just *be*. He held the tea between his paws as he hadn't done in so long and felt like he had come home. He thought after five years of... *that*... it would take a little longer to feel even a fraction of the comfort he spent fifteen years building. Maybe he'd never actually *been* comfortable, just adept at functioning despite.

Regardless, he was here now. Even if he didn't quite believe it. There is no way he would have ever dreamed up such an eclectic collection of hero merchandise and gym equipment. *That was one point in reality's favor.*

"I don't know who took me, personally, but I had been expecting something of the sort for a long time," Nedzu started, eyeing the hero posters that plaster the living room walls. Midoriya might not be able to make eye contact, but Nudzu still found it uncomfortable to speak directly to his face. "They were prepared for me. I thought I had been prepared for them, but I'd also settled into a life at UA. I was happy there, and when you're happy you invariably have something to lose. They used that against me." UA was his fortress, its staff his soldiers, but it was also his home; they were his family. He would have done anything to keep them safe *(had done anything).* "Initially it was that threat that kept me from anything drastic and they, in turn, kept me from any useful information."

"It's hard to imagine anyone being able to contain you."

"It's how I started out, isn't it?" Nedzu said perhaps a bit too sharply. That wasn't how he wanted this conversation to go. He wanted information, not a verbal punching bag (not that it wouldn't feel good, but Midoriya was the wrong target).

"Sorry," Midoriya muttered, sinking in his seat. Nedzu breathed the steam of the tea.

"As time went on I was transferred from facility to facility, no common thread between them. They became less concerned about what I observed. It became apparent that I wasn't being detained by villains, or secret government black ops. It was just. Just *people.* Bureaucratic, common people who had no idea what to do with me, passed on from some other branch of the government that had solved the problem by shuffling me off. It became more standardized, over time. Procedures and protocols that they could now apply to people like me, a 'quirked animal'. From there I was able to comprehend the shape of the world that must exist for these things to be possible.

"There would be no place for me as the person I was before capture. I would have to fit into the box they made for me, or I would have to go rogue against the whole system. So long as that initial threat was still active, and I had no way at the time to verify, defying them was not an option. So here I am."

Midoriya cracked a wobbly smile. "This whole thing is so messed up."

"Try *living* it," Nedzu snapped. Midoriya flinched. "I mean... Forget it."

"Sorry," Midoriya mumbled, face muffled under his hands. "So what now?"

"Now, you tell me what happened to you," Nedzu prompted.

"Right. Okay." Midoriya took a big breath and let it out slowly. He went to speak, stopped, and took another breath. "I... um... where should I start?"

"Maybe start with why you retired?"

Midoriya winced hard.

"My eyes... *right.* Well. Um. There was a villain attack? I mean, there's lots of villain attacks, but this one was *bad.* I ended up in hospital needing surgery. They kept me in a coma for three days." Midoriya chuckled like it was a joke.

"And... you were blinded in the attack?" Nedzu asked. He's forgotten how one needed to talk to Midoriya. It's a balance of getting him to talk at all versus getting him to ramble in the right direction.

"No! No, that's the thing! I busted my arms and cracked a few ribs, but the *real* injury was my spine. Luckily they were able to sort that out with quirks, *there was a cool one that focuses on the nerve pathways and..."*

"Akatani."

"Right! Sorry! So no, there's no damage to my eyes or even my head. Not even a mild concussion! But I wake up and I can't see, right? They run a few tests but can't figure out what happened, chalking it up to a bad reaction to the coma, but most people don't dig very deep when the patient is quirkless. Can't really blame them, right? *Body has too many obsolete variables like toe joints so obviously my eyes are.* .. Sorry. Anyway, they can't, or won't, figure out why my optic nerves are non-functional but the upshot is that I can't see. It's okay though, because I know why it happened."

Midoriya paused, leaned forward towards the empty space to the left of Nedzu.

"It was a warning."

"A *warning?"*

"Yeah, we were... I was getting close to something he... *they,* didn't want me to. They wanted me to back off. There was nothing in the attack that could have caused it, the blinding was *deliberate.* Obviously so," Midoriya absently put his mug down and Nedzu nudged it away from the precarious edge.

"So. *'They'* engineered a situation to incapacitate you from hero work to keep you out of the way. A *permanent* situation. Forcing you into retirement. And to you that's just a warning?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, they could have killed me or left me paralyzed but they didn't. I've been fighting with a 'handicap' all my life, what's one more challenge? Plus Ultra, right?" Midoriya said.

"So what were you doing that made it so important for you to be removed?" Nedzu asked.

"Uh, well, you remember Shinso? Shinso Hitoshi?"

"Yes, I think so. You were rather good friends?"

"Well. He's. He's missing," Midoriya twisted his knuckles until they cracked.

"You were looking for him?"

"Not really... he went missing the same day this," he gestured to his eyes, his arms and legs "All this happened. *Coordinated? It's certainly possible, not like it wouldn't have made sense for..."*

"Shinso is missing?"

"Well he *wasn't,* but now he is. And that's a problem I'm really quite concerned about but what really likely set them off is what the two of us were looking into."

"Which was...?"

"Sorry, I know I keep going off topic, just haven't really talked to anyone in a while and it's a lot harder to put things into words when you've just been thinking them and *oh god sorry*. Right, we were looking into, um. Well it all started when you were taken? Nobody really knew what to do, no one was expecting it. *Obviously.* But well, it's UA? It's full of heroes, and heroes in training. Everyone stepped up. But Mr. Aizawa... Mr. Aizawa stepped *down.* Turned in his resignation an hour after you were noticed missing. He just... left. No one saw him for days but we were so busy with everything no one had a chance to do anything about it. Present Mic took over as principal but he... well. He was like a ghost. He saw us through to graduation, but then he left. America I think. Took Eri.

"It was a very strange time. It's like the world we were preparing for didn't exist anymore. The government changed, there were new rules and regulations that just... *codified* all the unspoken quirkism that was already there. It happened so fast! Measures were introduced to protect people, to make sure people with 'incompatible quirks' weren't exposed to things they weren't 'equipped' for. They had some very pretty speeches but it didn't change the fact that all these rules targeted mutation based quirks almost exclusively. But if anything... the public seemed relieved? Quietly, people with undesirable quirks were displaced, and *publicly* the system seemed to work. Villain attacks were down, the economy was prospering... I'm not trying to make excuses! It's just a really

weird time and no one could really find their footing and it..."

"Akatani. It's okay, just keep going," Nedzu sighed.

"Anyone who spoke up about it never seemed to be able to get more attention than the latest sports festival, or hero ranking. It seemed like nobody was listening."

"Everyone underestimates the control of the media. Once upon a time that worked to my advantage," Nedzu said.

"I am so glad you are here right now. You have no idea. You just seem so calm, like..."

"Like I've seen this all before?" Nedzu sniffed. "Like I know what to do next? Well, at least one of those things is true."

"Yeah. I..." Midoriya took a deliberate breath. "It's all just a mess."

"So Aizawa disappeared right after I did, and then you and Shinso started looking into that?"

"Um. Not quite. Hitoshi might have started looking into it before I did, it was... Well. When we graduated UA it wasn't just, 'Go off, you're heroes now!' there were new rules that limited anyone with a mutation quirk, which is like a quarter of our class alone. Anyone who had a problem with those rules also found themselves with limited employment options. So on the one hand, we could shut up about it, fall in line and save people. Or we could make a fuss and *maybe* possibly help the ones no one else seemed keen on saving. We were there to be heroes but none of us could agree on what that meant anymore. In the end, we all went our separate ways; falling into hero work, legal or otherwise, or just disappearing off the face of the earth.

"As a quirkless hero I got lucky. Signed up with Mirio's agency. Makes sense, right? First quirkless hero with the first naturally quirkless hero! It was a good placement for me. It allowed me to get a reputation, which is what I thought I needed. *Harder to be disappeared if you're in the public eye!* A bit of a shield for the work I really wanted to be doing behind the scenes. Turns out most of the class thought the same way?

"Hitoshi got in contact with a few of us. Through his underground work he'd been able to get in contact with Mr. Aizawa. It's... well. I don't really want to talk about it here, but the short of it is he had a lead on some very dangerous people he suspected were involved with you disappearing. Just when it all seemed to be coming together, he went missing. It was like... a ghost story. Everything we'd uncovered just turned into nothing but dead ends and our lead investigator was gone.

"Everyone else disbanded for the most part. Without any leads it was too dangerous to continue. Only Hitoshi and I remained active with the underground scene, hoping something would come up through our work. Two months ago something *did,* though Hitoshi wouldn't tell me exactly what. We were supposed to meet up the day before that villain attack but he never showed.

"And. I can't check my phone... so I don't know if he sent anything. I've been too paranoid to get anyone else to look into it but. You're here." Midoriya shot up. *"You're here now!"* He scrambled between the couch cushions furiously until he retrieved a phone. Nedzu shuffled in his seat as a clue to his location. Midoriya bowed with phone outstretched. "Please!"

Nedzu stared at the device. He knew he had been starved for communication for far too long, his coat had borne the brunt of it. But now with it in his grasp it felt like he was finally able to *breathe.*

Nedzu took the phone with a trembling paw.

~ About a month ago ~

Hitoshi woke up with a snort. *This was not where he was supposed to be.* It appeared that he was sitting in an empty office, judging by the carpet, false ceiling and industrial fittings. The only light available filtered in through a small window on the door. More windows that presumably looked out into the hall had been papered over.

He was sitting on an uncomfortable wooden chair with his hands cuffed behind him through the back. A generous portion of tape was keeping his mouth sealed. His head was pounding, but that was hardly new. But that was... it. No visible cameras, no full arm bindings, no visible deadbolting or any sort of Histoshi proofing.

It's like everyone forgot he was friends with Izuku.

He suppressed a grunt as he popped a thumb out of place and painfully pulled off one of the cuffs. He almost cried at the ache in his shoulders as the pressure was released, but he was on the job now. Taking a deep breath he pulled the tape off quickly.

Would it hurt more or less with a beard, he wondered.

Hitoshi pulled the chair over under the visible vent in the room and lifted his aching arms to pull off the cover. There was no way in hell he was getting up in there, but with a bit of luck he wouldn't need to. He dropped the vent cover on the seat of the chair and went to wait behind the door. Hopefully someone would be along soon to freak out about the manufactured tableau.

So, it seemed his investigation was making *someone* jumpy. *Gold star, Hitoshi!* He hadn't had a chance to meet with Izuku to fill him in on the current lead. Hopefully they hadn't realized Izuku was involved yet (not that Izuku knew anything, *Hitoshi you fool, why hadn't you even hinted...*). Ok, stop, priorities. *Spiral later.* First, he had to get himself out of this makeshift cell.

Feeling like a fool, Hitoshi looked at the door knob. It was probably locked, right? That would have been a safe assumption? He gave it a twist and huffed out an almost pleased sigh. His captors were semi-competent and the door was, indeed, locked. It was also a fire hazard but he was sure his safety wasn't their priority.

Speaking of priorities. He had some. Get out of this shitty cell, search the building to make sure they hadn't taken Izuku anyway (search for Aizawa, search for Nedzu, search for any of the lost). Then, find a way out of this shitty building, taking any and all information he could nab.

Do all this without bringing down the whole operation on his head.

Yeah.

Behind the door there was the click of footsteps. A shout as the vent cover was noticed, the door hastily opened to search for their prisoner.

Oh this was going to be *tedious*.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god dialogue. I am never asking Izuku to tell a story again.

I have no idea what kind of story this is anymore. Adventure? Comedy? Tragedy? Fictional socialization to make up for the lack of it in real life? WHO KNOWS? I have to keep telling myself this is for fun and is not a test. If you get even half the enjoyment from reading it as I did writing it, then it was worth posting. Thank you for your kind comments!

Connected

Chapter Notes

What kind of story am I even writing? I don't know anymore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku hadn't realized how much he had been *drifting* this past month. After waking up in the hospital it had just been one nightmare after another. His eyesight, his career... the possible threat to his friends and family. He'd been so focused on minimizing the fallout (convince his mother he could live alone, stop meeting up with his friends, trying to find a restaurant that wouldn't scam him out of his savings) that he'd lost sight (hah) of how far his goals had become. How impossible everything was becoming.

He had needed everything he had to make it as a pro-hero. Now he had to do it all over again with *less* .

He wasn't ready to jeopardize his mission because he wasn't able to see the writing on the wall. Originally he had planned to back off, train up until he was confident he wouldn't be a liability on the field. Tear the whole thing down brick by brick, even if he'd already be too late *it wouldn't have to be for nothing* . Now, though...

Well, as long as he had a resource in Nedzu (so long as Nedzu could put up with him) there was a chance he'd... they would be able to accomplish something in time to matter.

Once he'd handed the phone to Nedzu the conversation had been over. Izuku's throat was sore from talking, and it was probably best for him to stay out of the way. Not even ten minutes in, Nedzu had asked for a computer which he had happily provided. Things felt like they were finally starting. The energy in the apartment was revitalizing, but it made him restless.

"Shinso did contact you," Nedzu had said, and before Izuku could properly freak out, "It's a location, nothing else. From what I can tell it indicates an office building, *how original*, but it was dated three days after your planned meeting that never happened. I am looking into it."

They settled into a quiet afternoon. Nedzu hummed to himself as he tapped away at the computer and Izuku sank into thought as he went through his fitness routine. There were a few things bothering him (more than a few) but three really stood out to him as he was given space to think.

Firstly, who in their right mind would ever capture Nedzu and then just... let him go? Nedzu was the last person you left unmonitored if he had a grudge against you. Nedzu didn't just let things go either. There was certainly more to the story. It wasn't like they could just forget who Nedzu was. Izuku had seen the classified information (that he was absolutely not supposed to have seen) on Nedzu's threat ranking; he's pretty sure some of those protocols were invented *for* Nedzu.

Secondly, the only reason Nedzu was here at all was because Izuku needed help. While he would be able to take Nedzu with him anywhere, he would also have to be with him. Currently Izuku was a liability. He would have to find some way to become useful before Nedzu wrote him off as dead weight.

Lastly, it was just sinking in that while he had been emotionally prepared for a dog he was now living with a very clever, very sharp, very *observant person.*

"9 PM... is Here!" The little All Might announced in his tinny voice.

Izuku dropped from the chin up bar into a pile of... somethings. Huh, maybe his place was a little cluttered.

"Computer!" Izuku said. He could feel the questions from Nedzu. Full sentences Izuku, please. "I mean, I need the computer!"

Once he had the computer though, he handed it back with a blush. "Uh, can you please search for 'Scandal' livestream? And... start it up? It should be live now."

Oh that silence felt like questions. Like judgment.

"It's, uh, important." Izuku imagined you could probably fry an egg on his face. Luckily Nedzu didn't ask any of his questions. Izuku was grateful.

"Welcome night owls," a calm, toneless voice called from the computer. "I have a special treat for you tonight." Zero change in tone, delivered with less enthusiasm than the weather.

"Is that...?" Nedzu whispered.

"Yeah... uh yeah, that's Shouto." Midoriya whispered back.

"It seems my latest engagement has managed to attract enough attention to warrant a personal call from my father. He left a voicemail at 3:45 this afternoon. I will play it:"

"*Shouto, I don't know why you still insist on being an absolute disgrace, but you aren't even satisfied with that, you have to drag in your sister, who is the only one of my children with a scrap of common sense, and if THAT wasn't enough...*"

"And I'm done with that now. Thanks for calling, Father, I look forward to the next three months of silent treatment with intermittent calls from your PR department. Let's go to the news. There were twenty four articles published today regarding my engagement announcement to my old classmate, Aoyama. This is an impressive record for my twelfth, and perhaps second least scandalous, engagement."

"Mon Cher!"

"The chart is behind you, Aoyama, darling, it is just the facts. If you want to rise in the ranks you are going to need to put in more effort. Plus Ultra. It is my personal theory that so much attention is being paid to the wedding preparations to try and avoid the real questions brought forth by my latest encounter with 'Balloon Time; Vigilante or Villain'?"

"His costume is certainly a crime," Aoyama said.

"I have a theory that his name is a careful ruse to throw off any suspicion of his true purpose; viral marketing."

"He tried to bury you under a bus, what could he possibly be marketing?"

"Insurance, most likely. Rates are cut throat these days. And you can't say his outfit isn't eye-catching."

"More like an eye sore, mon dieu."

"Exactly, we all have very sore eyes. If you are listening, Balloon Time, or Balloon Time's shadowy employers, my beau Aoyama has more drama in his little finger than your buoyant agent of chaos. Twenty four articles and he's not even trying."

"I am... flattered?"

"Yes. I will include the link to his PR department in the description of this cast, look him up if you want to actually get some viral in your marketing."

"Please don't."

"Let's take some calls. This is Scandal, thanks for holding."

"Uh, hey Scandal, so why Aoyama? Did it have to be him? I mean, you could be with anyone, right?"

"Excusez moi?"

"Is this Sero?"

"No?"

"Sero, I'm really flattered, really. But you're just going to have to wait your turn."

"Darling, our love is eternal~!"

"Yes. I mean he will have to wait for eternity. To end."

"That's okay, I really only want in on it for the money. Rent is hitting really hard this month. Can you spot me?"

"You already owe me 500,000 yen."

"Uh... I'll sing at your wedding?"

"Mon dieu!"

"Nobody wants that, you're a terrible singer. You've been kicked out of karaoke. A place built for bad singing... Wait. That's perfect. You have a deal."

"Thanks buddy"

click

"Alright, next caller, thanks for waiting."

"AM I A JOKE TO YOU?"

"Ah, Balloon Time. I had been hoping for more than twenty four hours of distance from you, but I guess we don't all get what we want."

"THAT'S NOT MY NAME! ONLY YOU CALL ME THAT!"

"Nobody else calls you anything at all. In today's news you were referred to as 'That man? with a balloon quirk' or 'the inflatable menace'. Neither of which are proper names."

"YOU ARE NOW MY ARCH NEMESIS!"

"I would have thought that would have been the mirror, mon cher."

"AARRG.....~!" *click*

"...This is going to be my best marriage yet."

Ever since Shouto had figured out that his inherited prestigious legacy could be used for chaos he had been all over it. He could still be a great hero without being a serious one and his antics only endeared him to the public. It also conveniently allowed him a freedom of speech few could claim in the current political climate. That it annoyed his father was icing on the cake.

"This is Scandal, the Embarrassing hero, signing off. Also if anyone knows where to procure three tonnes of biodegradable glitter, hook me up."

The stream didn't end but started playing static instead. Shouto believed strongly in artistic expression.

He also believed in codes.

And conspiracies.

And secret messages.

3:45. Tonight. Item 24, 3rd character in. Password: Glitter.

~4 years earlier~

"...And this place has the best cold soba in town." Shouto said as he held the door open. Izuku eyes the interior dubiously. It's small, and the only light was coming in through the windows. Every piece of furniture was different, even if some of them might have originally been a set. They took a table in the corner next to a window and were promptly ignored by the girl fiddling on her phone by the cash desk.

Izuku settled into his off-balance chair, trying to position it on the floor to keep it from wobbling. Shouto helpfully kicked a piece of cardboard over to wedge under one of the legs. Izuku turned his attention to what he initially took to be a random leaf of newspaper but in fact only listed items of food.

"Is this the menu? It's one giant page of wall to wall text? How do you order anything?" Izuku whispered, trying not to raise a fuss in front of the apathetic employee.

"There's only one thing worth ordering. Besides, I designed the menu."

"You... what? Why would you do this? It's horrible! *Why would anyone let you do this?"*

"I come here a lot. You can also find it on the website."

He pulled out his phone. Maybe searching the restaurant would give him an excuse to avoid food poisoning.

"This website is atrocious! Did... did the restaurant give *itself* two out of ten stars?"

"They are very humble. Also, they are never busy."

"And this paper is so thin... I can see the wood grain through it. Wait." Izuku squinted suspiciously. "Shouto."

Shouto squinted at the menu. "I thought it was pretty clever."

"Oh my god. People are going to think this place is a front!"

"Do you think that would help?"

"Shouto, you are not starting a *drug ring* so that you can feed your conspiracy habit."

"It doesn't have to be drugs."

"How do you even know it isn't a front already?" Izuku hissed, waving at the faded posters for drinks he's pretty sure have been discontinued. The teenager snorted at her phone, but otherwise ignored them.

"That *would* make things simpler..." Shouto muttered.

"Are these ideas you come up with on your own or *are you getting them from somewhere?"*

Chapter End Notes

Trolldoroki is my alt.
Also, there is no romance in here, only trollmance.

Hey, if anyone has ideas for interesting quirks for some side characters I'm all ears.
No one who's going to have any sort of personality, just... obstacles.

Getting Around

Chapter Notes

> Uh, swearing now. And swearing for always past this point. Gotta earn that teen rating somehow! But other than swearing, we're not going to have gore or intense descriptions of anything unpleasant. This is a suspense/adventure/mystery story, not drama, romance, thriller or horror.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the past five years Nedzu had never felt so *cheated* before. While he was being carted from secure sterile box to secure sterile room Todoroki, *ScandaI* , had been out doing *this* . That he had missed these milestones... He had lost something precious.

Carefully he lined up the transparent menu with the map, centered on Scandal's last battle, and began to search for 'item 24'.

"...and so every time I pointed out how it might be a little excessive he found a way to double down on the obfuscation so at some point I had to just stop asking questions and just kind of... go with it? I mean not that it's not amazing but... Oh, the menu items aren't in numerical order, they're grouped by meat, so you might need to scan around a little bit..." Midoriya prattled on nervously.

"I think I've got it." Nedzu types the address into the map program. "Looks like a restaurant or bar? In the Endoru Satellite? "

"Oh the Electric Wok?"

"That's the one."

"It's about an hour from here, but the neighborhood isn't the greatest at night. Normally I wouldn't worry too much but... well. Things are different." Midoriya devolved into mumbles that sounded suspiciously like 'god I'm pathetic' and 'can't take me anywhere'. Nezdu's ears folded back.

"I think it would be worth the risk. Not like I expect to be getting any sleep tonight!" Nedzu chirped. Izuku froze.

"Oh no," he said. "I've just. I didn't even think about where you're going to sleep! I'm so sorry. I'm such a terrible host... *oh no.* I can switch the sheets if you want a nap on my bed? I only have the one, but the couch is fine for me..."

"It's fine, don't worry." Easy to say, Nedzu supposed. Midoriya stopped mumbling but continued to fiddle with his shirt. "Are you okay with going out tonight?"

"Oh, oh, yeah! If you want me to come? I guess you could go on your own, but I had kind of assumed that. Uh, sorry. I mean. Yes, I am okay with going out," Midoriya said.

"I think we should probably practice getting around. My 'training' basically amounted to wearing a harness and avoiding walls, but I think we can come up with something a little better than that." Nedzu was not interested in wearing the harness in the care package box provided by the Veteran Affairs office. It looked a little like a child's life vest with a sturdier handle; it was bulky and eye-

catching. Now that he thought about it, Nedzu would rather they not open that box at all.

"Right! Actually, I was thinking," Midoriya trailed off.

"Thinking is important," Nedzu said.

"Well... I had an idea? It's... um, probably silly but have you ever seen those sheep herding dogs?"

"Not personally, but I am aware of the concept."

"They guide the dog by using whistles for directions! What if you did something like that for me? You be the farmer, I'll be the dog!"

"It's certainly worth a try!"

They fumbled their way through finding an outfit for Midoriya that was baggy enough for Nedzu to ride in that wasn't also pajamas. A combat harness was added to keep Nedzu from choking Midoriya with his own shirt. It also allowed Midoriya to equip a few useful and hidden support items from his arsenal.

In front of the mirror with Nedzu tucked against his back and peeking over his shoulder, Midoriya looked like a regular, if lumpy, teenager. The oversized hoodie carried the impression of scraggly youth almost entirely on its own.

"I think it looks great," Midoriya said with a large grin. "I don't think I actually have ever worn this hoodie before! Kacchan gave it to me as a... gift? He said I would grow into it. I still have no idea if it was a jab at my height or my weight, or if he just never wanted me to wear it. I'm not even sure why I kept it."

"Well it's lucky for me you did, otherwise we would have been stuck with the All Might onesie. Are you sure you don't need a mask or something to disguise your face?"

"Why would I?"

"Trashed privacy."

"Oh right. Well, people recognizing me in the street as a civilian has never really been a problem. I'm very plain."

Midoriya hadn't really left his apartment since losing his vision so taking the stairs was an adventure. A slow adventure. His student had always been quick to learn (and quicker to trust) so they had made their way without too much trouble. They had to take a moment at the street for Nedzu just to look up at the stars. Nedzu couldn't cry in the traditional human way, but when he gave an involuntary keen Midoriya obliged for him. They had sniffled their way to an empty park a few blocks away when Nedzu became aware of the first issue with their plan.

"So. I can't whistle," Nedzu said. Midoyira laughed.

"What! Not even like," Midoriya brought his fingers to his mouth and produced a piercing whistle. A dog started barking across the street. Nedzu sighed and patted the side of Midoriya's face with his paw.

"No, not even like."

"Oh god I'm so sorry," Midoriya cringed. "I didn't even think..."

"Not to worry, not to worry. I could just speak the directions but that might be a little slow..."

"Or hard to understand if you are further away."

Midoriya sat on a nearby bench, careful not to crush Nedzu against the backrest.

"I could..."

"Tap my shoulder? It might be fine for now but..."

"It only works so long as I'm in contact with you and not using my hands for something else."

They both huffed a sigh. Oh. Oh wait. Nedzu felt a stir of embarrassment at the thought, but it might just be the best option.

"So uh," Nedzu started. He cleared his throat. Tapped his fingers in a rapid pattern. Midoriya tilted his head towards him, cheek brushing his nose. "Uh. I think... I might have an idea."

Despite the lengthy pause left for him, Midoriya did not suddenly volunteer a better one.

Thanks Midoriya .

"I am... not sure if I can still do this but. But," Nedzu cleared his throat.

And Nedzu squeaked.

The mad giggles were not adequately muffled by Midoriya's hands. Nedzu hid his eyes.

"Oh My God that was the cutest thing I have ever heard," Midoriya gasped between breaths. "I'm so sorry I sh-sh-shouldn't be laughing but Oh my god... Why have I never heard this before?"

Muffled against his back Nedzu muttered about smoking and vocal chords.

Somehow Midoriya managed to gather himself enough to actually practice taking directions. It took a few tries for Nedzu to get a consistent pitch or length, but soon they had worked out a simple system of directions.

"You know, once I get used to it, they kind of sound like whistles?" Midoriya said. Nedzu trilled at him to duck under a playground structure.

"Not that I have ever taken direction by whistles before." Midoriya sped up into a light jog and Nedzu gave two sharp squeaks to turn him left onto the path. Midoriya didn't hesitate to turn. His reaction time really was very fast.

"Once I get over how cute it sounds it's really very helpful." Nedzu *chose* not to run him into a post and instead squeaked out a slight course change.

"Maybe we should add in some directions for punching or kicking?" Nedzu hisses out the command for 'stop' (a sharp intake of breath as though in anticipation of disaster).

"Who do you think you're going to be fighting?" Nedzu asked.

"Well the... the Electric Wok isn't the best place? It's. Um..."

Nedzu sighs. Midoriya won't be fighting anyone if he can help it, but he also knows what it's like to be vulnerable. At the mercy of everyone else. Nedzu makes a squeak with an ascending tone,

and one with descending.

"What do those mean?"

"If it goes up, punch, or kick, up. If it goes down, aim for the ground."

"What if I need to aim straight forward?"

"I don't think that will really be an issue for you."

"Is that a height joke!? From you!?"

They got chased out of the park around 1AM after a complaint was called in about suspicious activity. Not wanting to actually deal with the cops they ran off before they could be cornered. They took the train into the neighborhood of Endoru and headed to the local night market. Navigating the crowds was good practice. With the hood up and Nedzu tucked into the shadow of it he was able to give directions largely without being noticed at all. He did get scolded to 'take his phone call somewhere else' so Izuku assumed no one noticed his extra passenger.

Having a companion was reassuring after being alone so long. He was surprised how easy it was to slip into relying on the warm presence against his back, but he couldn't get over how light Nedzu was. He chose to believe it was the weight training paying off.

He really hoped it was the weight training.

"Have food stalls always smelt this good?" Izuku asked.

"I have no earthly idea," Nedzu said quietly; his stomach grumbled louder.

"Well, whatever you want, you're the boss!"

Izuku was maneuvered into line at various mystery food stalls. They ate until they were buzzing with sugar and heavy with grease. With time to kill they found a café that was a little less busy and tucked themselves into a corner. Nedzu described the colorful decorations and bizarre fashions as the crowds drifted past and Izuku closed his eyes as though he was just resting them, (pretending they weren't useless.)

Soon enough it was time to head out. They moved away from the crowds through quieter streets. The mouth-watering aroma of food gave way to fresher spring scents, dulled by the city though they were. Suddenly Nedzu guided him into a sharp right and there was the smell of trash and still water. Footsteps scuffed behind him and, more concerningly, ahead.

Izuku felt the hairs on his neck raise and adrenaline tingle in his fingers.

"Fuck," said Nedzu quietly. Izuku stopped moving without prompt.

It was strange, Izuku thought, how familiar this felt. Some part of him had expected the threat of a fight to feel overwhelming, or somehow impossible with his new vulnerabilities. He had expected the wild fear and chaos of his nightmares.

But.

Here he was. Faced with at least two opponents with the firm ground beneath his feet, his body wound tight with adrenaline and muscles that remembered everything he had beat into them. He felt more present and real then he did trying to walk across his apartment. Perhaps it was the fact

that this was a situation where he expected pain, unlike the betrayal of a sharp cornered coffee table.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going kid?" The falsely deep voice of a posturing delinquent. (Behind him, not in grabbing range yet.)

"Uh, I'm sorry," he let his voice tremble. "I didn't mean... I'll just be going? I don't want any trouble." Izuku turns slowly, hand fumbling for the alley wall. Nedzu twisted his paws into the harness, tightening the straps against his chest like it would hold him back.

"Haha holy shit, are you blind!?" Another voice called out, the other direction this time.

"I'm sorry, I'm just lost," Izuku said and stumbled back into a crouch. Nedzu tapped his shoulder three times. Three opponents, he guessed. He hoped Nedzu would warn him if there was a weapon. Ahead of him the unknown figures scuffed closer. (Less likely to have range if they felt the need to advance.)

"It's just not your lucky day, is it?" The first voice said, closer this time. "But maybe we'll give you some help for a little fee?"

Or they just didn't expect a fight at all.

"Uh, I think I have a little money? Let me just... I can just get..." He's suddenly jerked backward by his hood.

"Wha.... Ow OW OW! Let go let go let go!" Nedzu had latched (bit?) onto the hand that grabbed him and Izuku was pulled into a mess of limbs.

While Izuku was no slouch with a ranged weapon he was really more of a brawler. And. You didn't need to see an opponent to know where they were. You just had to hold onto them.

Before the upward note of a whistle could guide him, Izuku was throwing his whole body behind a punch in his opponent's direction. It landed with a satisfying crack. He rolled to the side to keep his back shielded, but Nedzu had already slipped free and dropped to the ground.

Blows seemed to come from every direction, but Izuku was familiar with the rhythm of battle. Every hit was returned twice as hard, even if not to the same assailant. Izuku noticed he was grinning when a smack to the face caused blood to pour into his teeth. There was a grunt of pain when Izuku grabbed a horn (antler?) and twisted hard, throwing a body to the ground. A scream from behind him as Nedzu landed a hit.

Izuku paused for a breath when he was suddenly disengaged from the press of bodies. He pushed back his hood to get his bearings.

"Holy shit," one of the thugs said. The other two must have stopped struggling as the alley went quiet. "Holy shit guys I think that's fucking Deku."

"No," another groaned. "You're shitting me."

Izuku spit out a mouth full of blood.

"Fuck, it is," said the third.

"I did not sign up for this."

"Holy shit what are we going to do?"

"Just run, moron, he can't ID you! He can't see!"

"What about the mouse?"

"What about it, just run asshole!"

A scuffling of feet and they took off. Izuku had *missed* this.

Behind him, Nedzu started laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Superman: Removes glasses

Deku: applies blood and smile

I am starting to write chapter 10. I need to get this thing up to chapter 6, which I really think is the starting line of the story. Chapter 5 will be up tomorrow, chapter 6 on Thursday. Then we're back to once a week schedule.

A Meeting

Chapter Notes

Nervous about these next two, but they are needed to get the story up and running.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I thought you said you wouldn't be recognized in the street," Nedzu said. He was tucked back under the hoodie and picking a safer route to the restaurant.

"It's probably the blood."

"That's not concerning at all!"

"The media liked to corner me after fights, the bloodthirsty leeches..." Midoriya said. "They dodge me like the plague at press conferences, but as soon as I look a little beat up it's all 'Deku when are you going to retire?' and 'They almost got you that time!'"

"I'm going to burn it all to the ground! Also, I think we're here. It doesn't look very open." Nedzu eyed the dim neon sign depicting a furry creature eating noodles. Luckily, no one else seemed to be hanging around.

"Uh, what... are... burning?" Midoriya asked.

"Don't worry about it! Now, are we breaking into the restaurant, or meeting behind it...?"

"N-No! We're not... we're not going to break and enter!" Midoriya hissed, grabbing for Nedzu's foot before he could slip down. "Shouto has a thing for basements, so we just need to go to the lowest door. I think it's on the right side, down some stairs? Ah yeah, that smells familiar." Midoriya held his breath as Nedzu guided him to a steel door with a sliding hatch. Very speak-easy.

"This is very convenient. How did he find a place like this?" Nedzu asked. He leans up over Midoriya's shoulder to knock on the hatch.

"Convenient nothing. He custom renovated this place."

"Really? That hardly seems like a subtle operation. Construction is very easy to trace," Nedzu said. He had to dodge a hand that Midoriya threw at his face.

"Shh! The last time I said that he built like... a thousand more. Don't give him ideas!"

Hmm.

Behind the door there was a loud scraping and the hatch was thrown open. Nedzu couldn't see inside but he felt eyes on them. He was struck by the sudden need to hide. Maybe he wasn't as ready to meet his other students as he thought.

"Password," an electronic voice said.

Midoriya was one thing. It hadn't occurred to Nedzu to be nervous of him. Midoriya was like a puppy; he loved unconditionally and was easily distracted. More importantly, Midoriya understood.

"Uh, it's uh, Glitter? I think," Midoriya said.

Midoriya knew what it meant to have to fight for every scrap of respect he got. He knew that basic decency wasn't the default option.

There was a clatter of electronics.

"DEKU?!" a familiar voice cried. Nedzu suppressed a flinch.

"Ochako!" Midoriya said. The door was thrown open and Midoriya suddenly had an armful of muscled woman. Nedzu ducked back down under the hood to avoid a face full of hair. Midoriya pushed her back almost immediately with a quiet 'ow ow ow'.

"You're bleeding! What the hell happened, where have you been!?" Uraraka wailed. Nedzu's heart sped up at the volume. What was wrong with him? Why was this bothering him more than the fight?

"Uh, how about we go inside to talk about that? There's... there's a lot."

Maybe it was because they knew him. Had known him. Maybe it was because he had time to think and anticipate, unlike his reunion with Midoriya.

"Right." Uraraka straightened up, sniffing away her tears, and ushered them inside a dim corridor. She picked up a heavy metal slab like it was cardboard and fit it into place behind the door. Nedzu tried to remind himself that Midoriya wouldn't have brought him here if it wasn't safe.

Uraraka grabbed Midoriya's hand and tugged them through a curtained door.

Maybe he was afraid of what they would see in him.

They entered a cozy room, nicely decorated in the traditional Japanese style, with a small table in the center. Young Todoroki and Yaoyorozu sat on one side, perfect dignity at odds with the mountain of stuffed animals between them. And oh, was that tea?

"Izuku!" Todoroki and Yaoyorozu said, leaping to their feet. Everyone was suddenly talking at once, crowding close to Midoriya while Uraraka fended off their welcoming arms with a hissed 'He's hurt!'.

And oh, maybe he was afraid to see the disappointment. That realization that their intelligent, reliable principal had just been an act.

"Guys, wait!" Midoriya said. "Just... give me some space or something. I have a lot to talk to you about. But first, is it safe to talk here? Is it just us?"

Please let these be the only people.

"It is just us," Todoroki said. "And we aren't really expecting too many people tonight. All the usual safeguards are in place."

"Good. Uh. Good. Well, first, there's this," and Midoriya bowed, removed his hood and Nedzu was not ready. He ducked back under the hoodie. Without thinking he was desperately crawling around

to Midoriya's front, trying to reach the place his hindbrain registered as 'safe'. Put Midoriya between him and the threat.

"Ow shit, I... oh no..." Midoriya brought his arms up and tucked Nedzu in close. His claws were making a mess of Midoriya's shirt front, likely catching the skin behind. "Ow, damn, we were just in a fight and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have just done that with no warning, oh god I'm useless, I'm sorry you're ok. You're ok." Nedzu tried to release his grip but his paws were not cooperating. It was also hard to think past the burning in his chest.

"Just breathe. It's okay," Midoriya said, taking slow breaths. Nedzu tried to copy him, coughing when the first attempt failed. He felt the reassuring thumping of Midoriya's heart and pressed his paw to it. Midoriya gently rubbed a hand up and down his back until he found his rhythm again, patiently whispering encouragement.

The rest of the room was very quiet save for what sounded like a hissed conversation at the table. Nedzu eventually felt the fear drain out of him to be replaced with a numb exhaustion. He slumped against Midoriya.

"You ok? It's just me, Momo, Ochako and Shouto here. Nobody else. We're safe here, it's ok," Midoriya said. Well, so much for dignity. "Don't worry about it, we've all been there. It's ok, I screwed up, I shouldn't have done that. I'm so sorry." Had he said that out loud? "Are you ready to talk now? It sounds like you're breathing easier. Also, you're not clawing my chest and I really appreciate that you've stopped. Not that it's a problem! If it helps it's no problem at all, just don't worry about..."

"You have no sense of self preservation," Nedzu said. Midoriya gave a wet chuckle. Of course he was crying. Nedzu felt a little better not being the only mess in the room. Time to take advantage of the emotional numbness and greet his kids (these adult pro-heroes). He sighed and heaved himself up to Midoriya's shoulder, balancing himself against his head.

Before him he saw the backs of his three students bent in a low bow.

"What's this?" He asked. Yaoyorozu glanced up at him briefly before returning her gaze to the floor.

"Principal Nedzu. We are so, so glad to have you back. Your loss was a huge blow to the school, to each of us individually, and to the world as a whole. We missed you. And we failed you. Please forgive us," Yaoyorozu said. Tears dropped from her nose to the floor.

"Please forgive us!" Todoroki and Uraraka echoed. Nedzu was never one to turn down an opening for a speech, and this was a prime opportunity if he'd ever seen one. The only problem was that he could think of nothing to say. Nedzu swallowed.

"There's nothing to forgive," he said.

"Please!" Uraraka cried. Nedzu's eyes landed on the teapot.

"I'll tell you what. How about you make me a cup of tea and I'll forgive you for everything you think you may have done?"

Once the laughter (with a sprinkling of hysteria) had died down, and Midoriya was suitably bandaged and iced, and Nedzu was set up with tea, they sat at the low table. Todoroki sat across from Nedzu, staring at him unblinking. Midoriya and Uraraka were huddled under a blanket to his right, leaning against the precarious pile of stuffed animals. Yaoyorozu was fiddling with a scrap of

cloth coming from her arm, eyes flicking back and forth as she did calculations in her head.

"Little Helper," Todoroki said. Nedzu felt the hair on his back rise. "I knew the government had something to do with it." Just as quickly his fur smoothed. Midoriya barked a laugh.

"It was fifty fifty government and villains. If you have even count them as separate groups at this point. Wait, what's ‘little helper’?"

"Nedzu's shirt," Uraraka said. "It's a uniform I think?" Nedzu breathed the steam of the tea.

"It's psychological warfare," Yaoyorozu said. And now Nedzu was choking on tea. She pat his back before presenting him with a simple black shirt with a high collar. "It's nothing special, but anything is better than that. Are the pants ok? Do you want shoes?"

"Oh god I didn't even think of clothes! I am the worst host ever..." Midoriya said, leaning into Uraraka as she pat his head in sympathy.

"This is perfect," Nedzu said, shucking his shirt for the new one. "Funnily enough the pants are fine. The shoes I'm most comfortable with are a special design, I would rather go without until I can get new ones made."

"So what's going on now! How did you find him, Deku?" Uraraka asked.

"Uh, well he kind of found me?"

"I was assigned to him!" Nedzu said.

Silence.

"The government... just... gave him up? They sent him to you? Midoriya ‘They had to blind me to try and get me to stay out of their business’ Izuku?" Todoroki said.

"Technically he was assigned to Akatani Mikumo..." Midoiriya said.

"Because there's so many blind quirkless ex-pros!" Uraraka said sarcastically.

"Uh... there's actually a lot more of us than you might expect."

"What?" Yaoyoruzo said.

"But... the boom of quirkless heroes came after you! There's like, no time for there to be all these retired injured pros?" Uraraka said.

Midoriya laughed.

"How many do you think are active right now? It's more common to find a retired quirkless hero than one on duty. It's hardly news. And I mean that. Nobody spends time on it because, well... isn't it just to be expected? They spend all their time hounding the active ones for why they haven't retired."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"It still doesn't make sense," Todoroki said. "If you want to attribute it to the incompetence of his captors, this whole... Nedzu suddenly showing up thing. If it was incompetence, why could none of us find him for five years? We aren't that bad at our jobs. Why now? There's something that we're missing."

Nedzu cleared his throat. "I have a theory."

Three pairs of eyes snapped to him. Ah, an audience. How delightful.

"One month ago Shinso Hitoshi went missing. He failed to show up for a meeting scheduled with Midoriya, which we will consider day one of his disappearance. The day after this intended meeting, Midoriya was injured in a villain fight and hospitalized. Midoriya was incapacitated for three of those days, waking on the fourth to find he was blind for no discernable reason. Midoriya was unable to check the messages on the phone he used for underground work until I was available as a trusted resource."

"Deku..." Uraraka said, squeezing his hand. "You didn't have to do this alone. You know we would have helped."

Midoriya closed his eyes. "I had no idea what was going on. I couldn't trust that I was ever actually alone in a room, or that no one was listening or watching. I would have risked endangering anyone I asked for help without being able to protect them."

"But Shinso was already possibly in danger," Todoroki said. "By refusing to reach out for help you may have denied him his life line."

"Shit," Midoriya sat up, the blood draining from his face. "Oh my god. What have I done..."

"Shouto!" Yaoyorozu scolded. Todoroki returned her glare stolidly.

"It's true. Izuku's need for independence ..."

"Stop!" Nedzu said. "Midoriya, if I thought there was a chance that Shinso was relying on you as his lifeline I wouldn't have waited to bring it to your attention now. There is a strong possibility that he is just fine but avoiding you for the very reason you tried to isolate yourself. Yes, you should rely on your friends more, but you had real reasons for your choices. Let me finish.

"Three days after his disappearance, Shinso sent a location alert to Midoriya's phone and nothing else. The location was an office building in downtown. But more interestingly, it is also the head office of Veteran Affairs. It is where the paperwork is processed, and generated, for every service they provide in the area.

"We cannot know what actually happened, but seeing as I was assigned to Midoriya... it is a rather big coincidence. I was also assigned under the designation 'Suki', which at the time I thought was them not bothering to remember I had a name. But perhaps that was an intentional mix up.

"My theory is that whatever happened to Shinso, he ended up in the Veteran Affairs building. Possibly captured initially, seeing as he missed his meeting, or perhaps he had infiltrated the building and was unable to leave safely. It is likely he was unaware of the attack Midoriya was involved in, nor Midoriya's condition, when he sent his location. If he did interfere, it is likely he now knows Midoriya's situation. He would know the act of putting us together would help us both as well as allow us to investigate his disappearance.

"If this is Shinso's work, then we should also be able to assume that he has not been discovered. I was successfully delivered to Midoriya with no visible suspicion on the part of their agent as of yesterday!"

"So you think Hithoshi is okay?" Midoriya asked quietly.

"It is probable!" Nedzu said.

"Hold on," Todoroki said, frowning. "Did you just bring him straight to one of my secret bolt holes directly from the government? What if he's chipped with a tracker?"

Blindness did nothing to prevent Midoriya rolling his eyes.

"Oh my god Shouto... should I have just found some other secretly shielded location, and some other people who know how to search for and deactivate such things? You just told me I should rely on my friends more!"

"You could have just said so at the start," Todoroki said, glaring at Midoriya. "I'm glaring at you by the way."

"Are you narrating your expressions!?"

"Boys, stop it!" Yaoyorozu said, slamming a hand on the table. Everyone jumped. "Izuku, he's been worried about you and he compensates by being an ass. Shouto, stop being an ass." Midoriya said something suspiciously like 'he's always an ass'. "Nedzu. Do you think it's a concern? I'd prefer not to do anything invasive, but I can set off a low level EMP to fry anything that might be there if you'd like."

"Excellent idea, Yaoyorozu. There are some gaps in my memory, anything is possible," Nedzu hoped politeness would prevent any prying questions on that little tidbit.

"Give me a moment then," Yaoyorozu said, concentrating on pulling a cute little bomb from her arm.

"What do you mean gaps?" Todoroki asked.

"Shouto..." Midoriya said with a warning in his voice.

"No, it still isn't adding up. Nedzu disappeared one day into thin air and we have no idea how or why it happened. Nedzu, who scared the commission so much they had protocols to contain him should he go rogue. Nedzu who controlled one of the most influential schools in heroics. Nedzu who..." Todoroki choked. "You ran this whole little world in which everything made sense, where there was order and safety. And then one day you were gone and everything fell apart. None of us could find you.

"We are not incompetent. Aizawa was not incompetent. You were gone and whoever had taken you was stronger, more organized and smarter than us. And now, today. They just let you go. Some data entry error was allowed to bring you back to us? What are we missing?"

"He doesn't know who took him Shouto!" Midoriya said. "And if he doesn't..."

"Actually," Nedzu spoke up. "I think I might know who took me."

"When did that change?" Midoriya asked.

"When I had a few hours of internet access," Nedzu said. Really now. "And I also think I know why. As for who took me initially, it hardly matters. They no longer exist." Nedzu pushed his empty tea cup towards Todoroki. Midoriya stopped grumbling to listen. Yaoyorozu set a little cat shaped EMP on the table for him.

"How many of you are familiar with a dead man switch?" Nedzu asked. All four of them raised their hands.

"I'm a connoisseur," Todoroki said. Uraraka covered Midoriya's mouth before he could reply.

"When I first came onto the scene after the lab, I wasn't welcomed into society with open arms. I was met with pity and suspicion. I did not achieve my placement as UA's principal through merit alone. One does not simply write a test and then get rewarded with power and responsibility! It is almost entirely down to who you know. And what you know about them." Nedzu sipped his tea.

"Blackmail." Todoroki nodded. Nedzu waved a paw.

"Some, perhaps. Not everyone has useful dirt on them! No, it was more a... network of dependencies. In the world of five years ago there were three pillars where the ambitious sought power; the government, the military and the media."

"What about heroes?" Uraraka asked.

"Heroes are overseen by the Hero Commission, which I would consider a sister organization to the military. There is a lot of overlap and transfer between their ranks. Largely, if you do well in one, you do well in the other. Government and media roles take a different set of skills. They are constantly fighting but also are dependent on each other. If you want to find the ones pulling the strings, that's where you'll find them."

"If you can only have power in one of those three places, why did you decide to become UA principal?" Todoroki asked.

"Ah! Perhaps I should phrase it more; if you want to be *in power* . If you want to change something, something fundamental, you go into education. But we digress. I achieved my position as principal not by convincing the powers that be of how *good* it would be for them but how *bad* it would be for them if I was not."

"Did you blackmail the entire government!? *Ochako, cover Shouto's ears* ," Midoriya said.

"Less blackmail, more threat of cascade failure. Mutually assured destruction? I had measures in place that if I died, or disappeared, the trigger would be pulled and it would clean house." Nedzu allowed himself a measure of satisfaction. Those days after he had given up on recovery, of rescue... he had thought they had found a way out of it. That it had all been more a house of cards than the bear trap he intended.

But.

"So it... failed?" Yaoyorozu asked.

"Not at all!" Nedzu said. "It went off perfectly! Not a single one of my targets got off unscathed."

"But... the government didn't collapse. Yeah, the prime minister changed, and a new party won the sudden election but... Well. It was organized," Midoriya said thoughtfully.

"How interesting!" Nedzu asked.

"Well, could it be that none of those people actually had anything to do with running the country?" Uraraka asked.

"I'll take that as a vote of non-confidence for the government as a whole instead of a comment on my target choice," Nedzu smiled. Uraraka winced and gave a sheepish smile. "It did seem like many of them were more concerned with lining their pockets than achieving anything, so I won't fault you there!"

"It means someone was ready to take advantage," Todoroki said.

"Precisely!" Nedzu said. "From there it is not hard to come to the conclusion that I was removed to pull the trigger on the dead man's switch."

"Forgive me, Nedzu," Yaoyoruzu said softly. "But if all they wanted was to trigger the trap, why... I'm sorry, but why wouldn't they just have killed you?"

"It is an interesting question, isn't it!" Nedzu said in a way that was not meant to be reassuring at all.

"I don't... I'm sorry. I just... it's a dead man's switch. There... there had to be more to your capture than just wanting the trigger pulled." Yaoyoruzu said.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. I think I am alive right now simply because of luck. When I was first taken it was by a small-time gang that I knew had been recruited by one of the smaller officials in the hero commission."

"I thought you said you didn't know them?" Midoriya asked.

"And I didn't! They were nobodies, Midoriya. People who should not have had the resources to reach me at all, much less want to target me. I was unable at the time to make any connection to a larger power who would have been brave enough to make the move. When they took me, I was put into a self contained box complete with life support. I was cut off from the outside world for... well, there was no way to know for how long. I only know that one group of people put me into it and that it was moved several times before another group pulled me out.

"After being able to get an outside perspective on the timeline it seems like I was probably passed from one failing group to the next. Like a hot potato! As things settled I was retrieved by whoever ended up in power and... well. Ended up here eventually. It is likely that whoever wanted me removed didn't bother doing the work themselves. All they had to do was give my (many) enemies a false sense of security so that they would make the move on their own! Very efficient."

"And the first to reach you just happened to not want you dead," Todoroki said.

"Well I did try to cultivate a reputation of having worse planned if I was killed, more than simply captured. It seems to have done some good!" Nedzu said.

"And now you're here because of a paperwork mix up, intentional or otherwise. As a little helper," Todoroki said.

"I'd really prefer you not call it that!" Nedzu said. Midoriya swatted a hand in Todoroki's direction and Todoroki moved into the clumsy hit stoically.

"I apologize," he said.

"Wait. All this time, we've been sitting on... a government bomb? All you had to do was disappear and then... everything was supposed to collapse? Isn't that. Well. If it hadn't happened the way it did, with someone ready for it, things would be really bad right now. We've been... one step away from societal collapse this whole time?" Uraraka said. She clutched one of the stuffed animals tightly to her chest.

"Don't oversell the government too much, Uraraka," Nedzu said. "But that wasn't quite what I had intended. You see, I expected there would be chaos and upset. But I also expected there to be generations of UA alumni to step in."

"You've been planning this the whole time," Todoroki said reverently.

"But we couldn't do anything!" Midoriya said. "Months after you disappeared and none of us were able to organize anything to even help ourselves. So many had to go into hiding just to survive!"

"Through no fault of your own!" Nedzu said. "This was planned, and planned carefully. Whoever started this whole thing out maneuvered me. I never saw it coming. As you have said before, you are not incompetent. Were it merely a power vacuum I have no doubt that you and your peers would have been highly successful in establishing order."

"I have been unknowingly part of the greatest conspiracy of all time," Todoroki said to himself. Midoriya's face scrunched.

"Well, I guess even Shouto has been pretty successful in organizing the whole vigilante network..." Midoriya said.

There was an uncomfortable beat of silence.

"What vigilante network," Todoroki said. Midoriya frowned.

"You know, the one you use all these bunkers for? You've got a network of cells that operate out of them? Do you not... call it a vigilante network? I don't think you've ever mentioned a name."

"I've never mentioned it at all. How do you know any of this?"

"Shouto we were *married* when you set it up," Midoriya said.

"It was a sham marriage!"

"You still lived with me!"

"We never talked about it!"

"I thought that was just operational security! Do you really think I'm that useless?"

"Guys! Can we get back to the part where there's someone who out maneuvered Nedzu!" Uraraka said. Midoriya groaned and rubbed his face.

"I. don't know what to make of this. I thought you trusted me," Midoriya said.

"Izuku... it wasn't..."

"No. This. It really hurts. And I know we're all really good at brushing everything under the carpet in order to... to function. This is a big one and it's not ok. To find out now when... I really needed you guys right now," Midoriya said. He flopped over sideways and his head nudged Nedzu's side. Nedzu dropped a paw onto his curls and gave a couple pats. "Fuck."

Nedzu generally didn't trust anyone as a rule. He could generally trust people to do the things he expected them to do, which was not the same. When people acted outside of his expectations he felt a sense of unpleasant surprise, like the world tilting under your feet, but it was never personal. He gave a couple more pats to Midoriya's head.

The silence was a minefield. Past experience told Nedzu he did not want to be the first to speak, and it seemed the others picked up on it as well. Midoriya heaved a sigh that lasted a good twenty seconds. His eyes were dry. Interesting.

"Alright," said Midoriya. "Let's talk about the guy who's smart enough to take Nedzu down."

"Izuku we just..." Uraraka said.

"No. We're here for business, we're not getting into it now. Move on," Midoriya said.

"When," said Todoroki.

"What?"

"When are we going to get into it?"

Nedzu could feel Midoriya grind his teeth.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe when I can look you in the eye." Midoriya said. Todoroki opened his mouth to reply but closed it again instead. "Nedzu, please explain what we're dealing with," Midoriya said.

"Gladly! But also I have no idea who it is, only that it is likely one individual or small group pulling the strings. There have been no obvious groups to rise in power over the past five years; only consistent policies and initiatives get through. We are far enough along that if there were a large organization behind it all this secrecy would either be unsustainable or an active hindrance to their operation. Instead, we have villains and dissidents quietly disappearing and government policies voted in along party lines. Someone is cherry picking what succeeds, and nudging others into failure," Nedzu said.

"So what can we even do against some... complete unknown?" Uraraka asked.

"It's not all bad! It just means we are fighting a dragon, and not a hydra! Much simpler," Nedzu said.

"Hydra?" Todoroki asked.

"If you cut the head off a hydra it gets replaced with two more," Midoriya said.

"But it's an invisible dragon," Yaoyorozu muttered. "How do we even begin to find someone Nedzu didn't even know existed?" With time and effort and attention to detail. Nedzu just needed some more information.

"It is likely they have an intelligence quirk," Todoroki said.

"Ah yes, one of those would certainly be useful right now!" Nedzu said.

"And now we have one just when we need it. It's too convenient. Why is it that you are here now, and not hidden nine floors down in Tartarus?" Todoroki asked.

Oh. They were at this part of the story.

Chapter End Notes

> To be fair Todoroki didn't start a vigilante network so much as buy a thousand safe houses and start speaking in code and then the 'vigilantes' showed up.

Dramatic Irony

Chapter Notes

> Oh dear. I thought posting chapters would get easier as it goes, but no. It scares me more every time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a secret Nedzu had never intended on being a secret, he was suddenly very reluctant to share. It would be inevitable, though, for it to come to light. If he said nothing here the first people who would discover this secret would be his enemies. It would give his allies an edge to know. It would help them react accordingly. The reactions alone would be entertaining.

So why was it so hard to let go?

Midoriya reached a hand up and patted the paw resting on his head. Completely blind and he could still read unspoken emotions. His favorite student indeed! Though he might just be trying to get Nedzu to relax his grip on his hair.

"It could be that they are under the impression I don't have an intelligence quirk anymore!" There, just rip off the band aid! (Nedzu didn't use band-aids) Under his paw Midoriya wheezed. Uraraka and Yaoyorozu stared at him with wide eyes. Todoroki just stared.

"And why... would the super villain who managed to engineer this whole... nightmare... believe that?" Todoroki asked quietly.

"Largely because people believe what they want to see. Roughly two years ago they subjected me to a procedure that was meant to disable my quirk. I was not conscious for the operation, so I do not know what they did, but when I awoke they were confident it was a success. It seemed prudent for me not to argue," Nedzu said.

"Disable?" Midoriya muttered. Even as close as he was, Nedzu couldn't parse the mumbles that followed.

"If they were so confident of success, how... how are you not...?" Yaoyorozu asked.

"Why didn't it work?" Todoroki asked.

Nedzu smiled. "You can't disable what can't be activated!"

The stunned silence was shortly broken by Midoriya's cackling. "You're kidding me! All this time and..! You just! No intelligence quirk....!" Nedzu was only slightly concerned by the shade of red Midoriya was turning.

"You're quirkless," Todoroki breathed.

"Is the mutation not enough?" Nedzu asked. "Humans are funny creatures. You rely so much on these birthrights to define who a person is that you miss seeing the person at all. I am very clever, to be sure, but it is nothing that hasn't been achieved by a baseline human. They were adamant that no animal could possess my intelligence and not have extra help. Ironically, the indicators they

took as above average intelligence can mostly be linked to me being able to see and process visual information as a mouse would. I had more things to worry about at the time than argue."

"So once they 'disabled your quirk' they thought, what, that you were average?" Midoriya gasped between giggles.

"One word answers and blank stares were enough for them to assume I was well below," Nedzu said. "Although I think I had at least one technician helping me. The brain scans after the procedure often went missing. Not long after that I was cleared for work approved for a quirked animal. I'm sure they never intended for me to end up out in the general population. It makes me think that our dragon does not have a direct hand in everything, as I am sure I would not have been suffered to live otherwise."

"So everything you've done... Anyone could have done it?" Todoroki said.

"Not anyone, I'm sure, but if you're asking if you..." Nedzu said, but was interrupted by Midoriya's hand on his face.

"Please do not finish that sentence, sir. He has enough ideas as it is. Shouto, you already have an underground vigilante network, *do you really need more* ?"

"I nod," Todoroki said, head still.

"Uh... well... *you're just getting worse with encouragement* ... um... moving on... At least we know where Mr. Aizawa is!" Midoriya's change in subject went over like a heart attack.

"Or was..." Midoriya said thoughtfully.

"What." said Todoroki.

"Midoriya Izuku, *what the hell are you talking about* ?" Uraraka demanded.

"Uh. It... it's just a theory! it's conjecture, I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, I think you should keep saying things," said Todoroki.

"Please," Nedzu said, voice small.

"Ok. Ok, well. Nedzu said they did a procedure to *disable* his quirk. It... uh, you didn't notice any scars or incisions after?" Nedzu shook his head, dislodging Midoriya's hand in the process. "Yeah, well. They didn't say they were going to *remove* his quirk, or reverse it, or anything. He's still got all his mutations, so the operation wasn't expected to affect that part. So, a non-invasive procedure with nominal testing afterwards, with an expectation of 100% success. Sounds like erasure to me."

"But it only erases when he's actively using it though?" Uraraka said. "How would they get it to stick? Couldn't they just use any erasure type quirk?"

"That's the thing. Erasure, or any quirk that affects other quirks, is *extremely rare* . There's a reason why the whole thing with Eri was an anomaly. There just aren't that many options for that kind of an effect, and there are plenty of people who want that power. If it was a medical procedure... well. It could be? It just feels like we would have encountered it before now if it were that simple. As for it being permanent... we already know there are drugs for enhancing a quirk to crazy levels," Midoriya tapped a table leg thoughtfully.

"Oh, also Mr. Aizawa went missing a bit over two years ago so the timing lines up."

~ A bit over two years ago ~

Shouta was escorted roughly down the hall. Through the bag over his head the building smelt like disinfectant. Lovely.

At least it would theoretically be clean this time when they dumped him on the floor.

Soon enough they came to their destination. A door clicked open and Shouta was shoved forward. A large hand kept him from falling on his face. *How polite* . He heard a chain dragged over and it was attached to the restraints on his ankles. Suddenly the bag was yanked off his head and his hands were released. Shouta blinked into the bright light as the two thugs backed away. They eyed him like he was a snapping alligator.

Good.

All he really had energy for right now was the baleful glare that followed them out of the room.

"Ah, Mr. Aizawa," A smooth baritone said. Shouta took a quick glance around the room before settling on the relaxed man in a business suit. Medical equipment and screens were set out around the sole bed in the room as though prepped for a surgery. There were no windows to the outside, but an observation room was visible on the far side. The chain attached to his ankle was fastened to a sturdy support bar on the wall. He did not have enough range to get to the door but it would be more than enough to reach the lounging man at the foot of the bed.

"Who the hell are you," Shouta asked. It came out more like a hoarse whisper than the intended growl. The man laughed.

"That's hardly important," he said. Hardly important my ass. "What you should be asking is *why are you here* ?"

That one was easy. Shouta was here because he had miscalculated. He said nothing.

"The right questions are *important* , Mr. Aizawa," the man tipped himself onto his feet, hands shoved deep in his pockets. "It shouldn't be hard to find one worth asking. Go ahead."

Fucking... games. Shouta glared at him. The man had no obvious mutation quirk. Everything was more or less baseline human. When it got to the punching Shouta was going to get a few good ones in before he went down. The man was way too confident not to have some way to neutralize him, but unless the man was quirkless Shouta would have an edge. Shouta's knuckle cracked as he clenched his fist.

"Oh my!" the man raised his brows. "So quick for a fight! We're not here for that."

"You might not be," Shouta said before he could stop himself. The man chuckled.

"I'll give you a hint," he said, kicking one of the screens away from the bed. It rolled away like a theater prop, revealing the bed. A blanket was pulled over a small figure in the bed. Shouta felt his heart plummet. A kid? What kind of sick game...

"I don't think you quite realize what's going on yet." The man smirked.

The man tugged down the sheet.

There, looking tiny and still in the white sheets, was Nedzu. Three years he'd been searching and he'd failed, *he'd failed...*

"Oh, hah! I can see how this could look bad," the man said from what seemed very far away. The room was spinning and Shouta was going to be sick. "He's not dead."

It turned out Shouta's legs still worked just fine. He was next to the bed with his hand on Nedzu's wrist before he knew it. Nedzu didn't twitch, but his chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. Adrenaline kicked in to numb everything and Shouta's hands started shaking.

"So are you wondering why you're here yet?" The man said, suddenly on the other side of the bed. Shouta pulled Nedzu toward him and punched out. The man wasn't anywhere close enough for it to land, but he backed up with his hands raised anyway.

"Relax, I'm trying to do you a *favor* ," the man said. That smirk was going to give Shouta energy for *days* .

"I'm giving you a choice. You've been searching for him for three years, it would be anticlimactic to find him already dead. For your hard work and dedication I'm giving you a shot at keeping him alive," the man said.

"What do you want?" Shouta asked.

"That's a little better! I want you to solve a little problem for me," he said, looking down at the bundle of Nedzu in Shouta's arms. "I have no interest in killing. I never intended for him to end up as my problem. But here he is, and here we are."

" *What do you want* ." These villains and their god damned games.

The man stopped smiling and looked at Shouta. "So long as he's the smartest person in Japan, he's a threat."

"So what, you've kept him under wraps until now."

"You and I both know that won't last. As soon as he sees an opportunity he'll become a problem. It isn't worth the resources to keep him contained. This will also serve as a proof of concept! Fitting, isn't it, that he should once again be useful as a lab rat."

Shouta shouldn't lunge at the man. He should prioritize protecting Nedzu while he's vulnerable. But. Shouta set Nedzu down on the floor gently.

"And what do I have to do with any of this?"

"It isn't about you *personally* . Just your quirk," the man smiled.

"The effect is temporary," Shouta said.

"Under normal circumstances, yes. But luckily I've got the solution!" The man pulls a cover off a nearby tray. There was only one item on it. It looked like a single dose of...

"Trigger," Shouta said. "I've never... No one knows the effect it would have on my quirk."

"That's alright, I've done my research. Quirks with temporary physical effects quite often become *permanent* with the right dose."

Shouta eyed the dose of trigger. The little table was three paces away and the man was four. He was buzzing with adrenaline. Shouta was fast even as run down as he was now.

"You've only got one chance," the man said. Shouta knew that. He was going to make it count. "I'm not careless enough to just give you a handy dose of trigger and walk away! It will only last for a few minutes, and once it's out of your system the sedative mixed into it will knock you out. He either leaves here quirkless and breathing or..."

Change of plan; Shouta was just going to kill him.

Shouta lunged for the man, faking a punch while sweeping out a foot. His actions lacked power but the man still went down with a startled grunt. He twisted the man over to put his knee in his back, but the man kept rolling. Shouta activated his quirk as a hand came up to smack him in the face.

"Shit... " the man gasped. He kept twisting in Shouta's grip, preventing him from getting a proper hold. "Shit you weren't supposed to..."

Shouta brought his head down sharply into the man's face. The spray of blood was very satisfying but forced him to blink.

When he opened his eyes he saw nothing. The man was still grunting and struggling under his grip, but no matter how many times Shouta blinked he couldn't see him. Had the lights gone out? He activated his quirk but... without his vision he had no focus.

"Don't you ever know when to give up!?" The man said, voice nasally. Shouta found himself suddenly flipped on his back but before he could regrip on his assailant the man had moved away. Shouta swept a hand out but met only air. The man was circling him, he could tell by the harsh breathing. Shouta got to his feet to track him.

"You're lucky I'm not vindictive," the man said. The bed rattled; had he walked into it? Shouta took two steps in that direction but smacked into one of the screens. The man kept moving away with heavy breaths wheezing as he went.

Suddenly Shouta could see. The man was standing by the door, leaning over so as not to drip blood on his suit. Out of range. Shouta flung a bedpan at him and the man flinched out of the way.

"Fuck!" The man fled through the door and slammed it behind him. Nedzu was still safely out of the way. Shouta took a moment to check the chain. It looked like it was welded to the cuffs on his ankle, which also seemed to be welded shut. *God damn quirks* .

A speaker crackled to life.

"You have ten minutes left to make your choice," the man said. He was in the observation room now. Safe behind the glass.

Shouta went to Nedzu and gathered him in his arms. He was lighter than he should be. Shouta let the rage ripple through him as he gently set his colleague (friend?) on the bed, smoothing the sheets around him. He allowed himself a moment just to hold Nedzu's paw. It was warm and soft.

There was only one logical course of action left.

"Without it, I wonder, will he be as smart as a mouse? A dog? A bear? Who knows!" The man laughed.

Shouta stood next to the bed and took a deep breath. This wasn't the end. So long as everyone was

alive there was hope. There would be another opportunity and he would fix this. Before he could contemplate it further he jammed the trigger dose into his arm and there was a surge of power unlike anything he had ever felt before. Around the room anything that wasn't secured started to lift. Shouta kept the bed in place with one shaking hand while he reached for the top of Nedzu's head with the other.

For once his eyes were not dry at all.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Ok Aizawa you wait there until someone comes to rescue you.

Aizawa: I'm going to punch him.

Me: Close enough

A Conversation at High Volume

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The meeting that progressed from that point onward was productive. Izuku just had to push that yawning abyss inside him down down down (his friends had left him out, left him behind, not included...) and focus on getting down to work! Work had always been there for Izuku.

People, on the other hand.

Well.

Izuku was used to pushing through on his own. He'd find a way.

Nedzu wanted to hit up some old contacts. It would be educational, he said, even if the only thing they learned was that the contact was no longer viable. There was only so much he would be able to learn from the internet, particularly in a world where the media seemed to be so filtered. They were at the point where they needed to do leg work. Izuku could be the legs! Those still worked just fine.

Ochako volunteered to go check out the Veteran Affairs building. While Nedzu didn't believe Hitoshi would still be there it was a possibility nobody wanted to ignore. More importantly, there should be records on Nedzu himself. They needed to find out where he had been taken from two years ago. It was the best lead they had on Aizawa yet.

It was just a theory. Izuku almost always got ahead of himself with those before he had the relevant facts. Didn't stop him from running his mouth, did it? Everyone had latched on to it though, even Nedzu! So perhaps there was some merit in it. Izuku really hoped so.

On the bright side he wouldn't have to see their disappointed faces.

Shouto decided that he would start preparing to storm whatever medical facility Ochako ended up linking Nedzu to. His specialty was distraction, so while he went up to the front desk with an army of desperate journalists and demanded to be told about the aliens or whatever, he would send a stealth agent behind the scenes to dig up a lead on Aizawa. (*So Toru then,* Izuku had said. *How do you know about my stealth agent?* Shouto demanded. *You don't know that many people,* Izuku had answered)

If Ochako didn't find anything useful he would just start going through them in alphabetical order.

Momo wanted to look into the other quirked animals that had been placed by the Little Helper program. If someone had used Aizawa to make Nedzu 'safe', then it stood to chance that it had happened more than once. Very little attention was paid to the quirked animals in the country, other than relief that someone was finally 'looking after them'. It might also uncover the location of some of the people they had lost along the way.

Izuku and Nedzu stumbled their way home through the morning rush. Izuku was careful to keep his head and face covered this time. Nedzu kept watch from behind his ear. When they got home all thoughts of sleeping arrangements were forgotten in favor of a hot shower and collapsing into bed. Nedzu curled himself up behind Izuku's head with Izuku's phone nearby. Nedzu had honest to god hissed when Izuku suggested that maybe sleeping with it wouldn't be a good idea.

All Might helpfully informed them that they fell asleep around eight in the morning.

Izuku woke to pounding on the door and his face glued to the sheets. He had no idea what was going on so he screamed and rolled to his feet. He took half the bed with him. Something heavy thumped to the ground. The something heavy rolled into his shin and clawed the shit out of it.

"Would. You. Shut. Up!" Came a voice punctuated with banging from the wall.

"Sorry!" Izuku shouted. He tried to detach Nedzu from his leg but he was wrapped up in a sheet which was also somehow wrapped around Izuku. The pounding at the front door continued.

"Answer your goddamn door!" the neighbor yelled pounding on the wall a few more times for good measure.

"Just... Just give me a minute!" Izuku yelled.

"Stop yelling!" his neighbor shouted.

Izuku made a rude gesture at the wall, secure in the knowledge that no one could see him. Nedzu started laughing. Izuku slumped.

"I can't untangle this. I think I'm just making it worse," Izuka said. Nedzu wriggled out of the sheet.

"Just give me a moment. Hold still," Nedzu said. Izuku felt the sheet twist and fall away. A small paw touched his shin gently. "These are going to need cleaning."

"It's fine," Izuku said. He swept out an arm until he reached a poster covered wall. "I really have to go answer the door." The person was still going at it. Didn't their hand hurt? It was five paces to the front door in Izuku's unsteady rush.

"Wait!"

Izuku yanked the door open. He didn't see anyone there.

"Ah Mr Akatani!" Ms Fukushi said. Her voice wavered, seemed breathless. Was she... scared? "You're bleeding!"

Yeah he was.

Fukushi pushed her way past him into the apartment.

"You stay *right there* , Mr. Akatani. I am going to help you. It's going to be okay, you have nothing to worry about." Izuku squeezed the door knob. Why was she here?

"It's ok! I'm fine," Izuku said. Fukushi seemed to be clattering around in the bathroom. Probably looking for a first aid kit. "You really don't need to worry about it." He shuffled his way along the hall. Hopefully Nedzu would just stay out of sight.

"Nonsense! I'm going to fix everything right up!" Her voice wavered. He didn't look that bad, did he? Her search of the bathroom was becoming a bit more frantic. "Mr Akatani where is...?"

"Ah, living room, if you're looking for the first aid kit." No! He didn't want her further in the house. Not while he couldn't see what she was doing. "Um, do you want any tea or...?" *Really Izuku...*

"Oh, no no no, it's just fine!" Her voice kept reaching higher registers. Izuku was catching contact anxiety. It was not helpful, he didn't need any more. He stumbled into the living room and grabbed onto the back of the arm chair.

"There we go, just have a seat!" Ms Fukushi said. Izuku did not want to have a seat.

"Uh, s-s-so why are you here?" He asked instead. Fukushi gave a tittering laugh that was the definition of nervous.

"It's uh, it's going to be ok!" She said instead of any sort of explanation. "Please sit, I promise everything is fine. I just need to check in with you. It is a good thing I did! My, what did you do to yourself?" She took Izuku's hand and shoulder to guide him into the chair. Her hands were as steady as her voice. Izuku wasn't sure he wanted her anywhere near his cuts. Izuku sat and held out a hand.

"Really, it's nothing. I'm ok. I can take care of it if you just give the kit. How about you tell me what you want to check up on?" Thankfully she gave him the supplies. She sat down across from him with a huff.

"Are those... claw marks?" she asked. Izuku stiffened.

"Uh, I had a little trouble last night?" Izuku said. "Mugged? Suki got... scared?"

"Oh dear. Oh dear dear dear," Fukushi said. "I was. Well. I am here about Suki actually."

Not a great start. "Oh?" Fukushi was fidgeting. Rings clacked against plastic.

"I'm sorry Mr. Akatani, it's just a bit embarrassing. I promise you that these things don't usually happen! You see... there's been a bit of a mix up."

"Mix up?"

"Ahaha, yes. You see Suki isn't really Suki at all."

Well shit. Someone had noticed the switch. How much did they know, however? Had Hitoshi been... "I'm afraid I don't understand?" Bluff bluff bluff, be clueless, Izuku!

"Ah. Somehow the files for Suki were mixed up with another. Your service animal isn't one that's been trained for service, you see! If the mistake hadn't occurred I'm sure you wouldn't be in as rough shape as you are now. We are doing everything we can to investigate, I assure you!"

"You train them to handle muggings?"

"No, no, don't misunderstand Mr Akatani! It's more that a properly trained animal will be able to *avoid* such situations! Their intuition is much more finely tuned, once they've been trained to utilize it."

Please don't be listening, Nedzu.

"Oh but I think Suki... or... whoever he is? Was very well trained! He saved my life, even if he got scared! I am very happy with him." Izuku threw in a smile for good measure. He hoped it wasn't as

manic as his Deku special.

"Ah, I'm happy to hear that he helped you. But still. It is not procedure to leave an untrained animal with a vulnerable person," Fukushi said.

Vulnerable?

"Is there anything I can do to keep him? I'm really very attached," Izuku said.

"I understand, Mr Akatani, but really you were assigned Suki for a reason. With your condition you need a companion with the right training. It would be in your best interest to go with the original animal we had assigned."

Yeah no, Izuku was not giving Nedzu up without a fight. Sorry Suki! Unfortunately he had no idea how to do that without his fists or angry words. He was also highly uncomfortable talking about Nedzu like a commodity. What he needed was someone used to fighting polite verbal spars.

"Uh... Suki? You... you uh, wanna come out here?" Izuku called. He had no idea what Nedzu would do, but it was surely better than anything he would come up with. He hoped.

"He's not Suki, Mr. Akatani," Fukushi said.

"Not... Suki?" Never mind, Nedzu was a ham. The slow, halting way in which Nedzu talked explained a lot about the 'assumed below average intelligence'.

"No, you're *Nezumi."*

Really?

"Nezumi?" Nedzu repeated. He padded next to the chair Izuku sat in and set a paw on his knee. To the average observer it might appear a gesture of comfort. To Izuku it felt a little like having a sword suspended above his head waiting for him to screw up. Why had he called him out here again?

"Ah, Nezumi then," Izuku chuckled nervously. Nedzu squeezed his knee. Was it encouragement or a threat. Who knows!

"Who... Suki?" Nedzu asked.

"Ah, Suki is a nice animal who is going to help Mr. Akatani here!" Fukushi said. Helpful! Nedzu's tail thumped into the chair. Oh, that was irritation!

"What... Nezumi... do?" Nedzu asked.

"Well, it looks like you were meant to go help people at the hospital," Fukushi said.

"What, like a therapy aid?" Izuku asked. Could he argue that he needed both Suki and Nedzu? *Izuku could use some therapy.* The silence felt heavy the longer it went on. Fukushi fiddled with her phone. "What... uh... what would Nezumi be doing at the hospital?" Izuku pressed. He was ninety percent sure he wouldn't like the answer.

"Oh, you know, research and things. He'd be saving lives!" Fukushi said. Oh... oh dear.

"Uh. Specifically... what would Nezumi be doing? Because well. Not gonna lie, that sounds an awful lot like you want him to be a lab rat." Nedzu's claws pierced skin. Wrong word, wrong word, wrong word!

"Oh no no no, nothing like that...!"

"Then what? Specifically."

Fukushi was silent. Nedzu released his knee with a pat. It seemed there was nothing polite left to say.

"Get out," Izuku said.

"Mr Akatani I..."

"Get *out* ." Izuku stood.

" *Mr Akatani,* I-"

Nedzu climbed up to his shoulder. Izuku took a breath. "You are not welcome in my home, Ms. Fukushi. You need to leave now."

"Or what?" Fukushi asked. "I have a right to be here, and Nezumi is under the jurisdiction of Veteran Affairs, you have no right to keep him without-!"

Izuku took a step forward, ignoring the murderous edge of the coffee table as it dug into his knee. Across from him Fukushi stood up, her voice losing power.

"Nezumi belongs to nobody," Izuku said darkly. "And he won't be going anywhere he doesn't want to go. Especially not to some fucking hospital as a test subject for medical research." Izuku waited for the neighbor to start screaming at him to shut up for yelling, but it was oddly silent.

In front of him Fukushi seemed to be sniffling.

"Please, Mr. Akatani, please don't yell. You don't understand, mistakes like this can't happen in Veteran Affairs. I need to fix this or I'm going to be in so much trouble."

"Trouble?" Izuku asked. Was Veteran Affairs at the heart of this? Maybe she knew something. "Ms. Fukushi, is someone threatening you? Do you need help?" He asked quietly. Nedzu flicked the back of his head with his tail.

"What? I don't... Mr. Akatani, I could lose my *job* ." Oh that was a sob. She was outright crying now. Izuku failed to feel bad about it.

"Your job? You're worried about *your job* ?" Was this actually happening? "You're worried about remaining employed with a place that ships people off to unwilling labor? To serve as test subjects?"

"It's a government job...!"

"A government that imprisons and enslaves people?"

Fukushi gasped. "It's not... It's not *like* that, it's complicated..."

"Then what's it like then? Please, explain it to me."

"We're *helping them* ! Do you have any idea how complicated it is to determine custody for a child when its mother is an unquirked cat? So many quirked animals are basically born orphans, with no capable adult figure present to look after them properly. It's a public service. We're giving them shelter and support to keep them safe!"

"They're still people! They should have the same rights and support as any human! They wouldn't need 'keeping safe' if you would just address the actual prob-"

"We're the only ones doing anything to address the problem!" Fukushi wailed. "It's... you don't have to be so *angry*. There's been research-"

"Unbiased research, I'm sure, peer reviewed and everything," Izuku said.

"Mr. Akatani, we know what we're doing. You *have* to understand, we're doing what's best for them."

"Can they say no?"

"It's not... they are *safe..."*

"Can they leave?"

Silence. Nedzu was practically vibrating on his shoulder.

"Can. They. Leave?"

Fukushi was taking shuddering breaths, trying to get her tears under control. Izuku wished he could see what the hell was going on. He didn't know if he was going to have to intercept a grab for Nedzu.

"I..." Fukushi started. "I. need. Just." And she was running. Out of the apartment judging by the slammed door. Nedzu patted his head.

"Good job!" Izuku was pretty sure he wasn't being sarcastic. Nedzu still seemed to be pretty jittery. Even odds it was rage or delight. Maybe both? "I had forgotten what it is like to have people speak up on my behalf."

Oh. That little pain in his chest was probably not medically relevant, right? "Anytime," Izuku said weakly.

"I'll go make us some tea, shall I?"

Izuku nodded and shakily sat back down. Nedzu thumped to the coffee table and scampered off to the kitchen. Izuku let the anger breathe through him. Well that was something. Izuku wasn't exactly new to willful ignorance but it still hurt to be confronted with it. He spent so much time trying to subvert the status quo that he forgot people thought the system was fine as is. He was lucky Fukushi was just ignorant and not malicious, otherwise it would have been much harder to scare her off. He had bought them a little bit of time.

Veteran Affairs had discovered the mix up. If it was because they had found Hitoshi... well. They would need to contact the others. Ochako would need to know at the very least.

"Do you think...?" Izuku started to ask, but there was a metallic clang as Nedzu dropped the kettle. "Nedzu?"

"I think I might know why they uncovered the mix up," he said like the mind reader he was.

"Oh?" Izuku asked weakly. Had they found Hitoshi? Instead of answering Nedzu started up audio on the phone.

"... and it turns out that Pro-Hero Deku is blind! The mysterious retirement of the plucky hero was

shrouded in mystery, until today after he was spotted out for a night on the town. Deku, along with a quirked mouse were seen in Endoru district last night...."

Fucking. Trashed. Privacy.

Chapter End Notes

Well I think I'm funny.

On the move

They needed to leave. It wasn't safe to stay in Izuku's apartment. Fukushi was just the start if they were intent on retrieving Nedzu. They wouldn't be able to carry a lot with them, but a backpack would be alright. It would also disguise the lump of Nedzu riding shotgun on Izuku's back. Izuku really hoped whoever came after them wouldn't totally trash his apartment.

He packed the little All Might alarm clock just in case.

Most of his support gear could be hidden on his harness under the hoodie. He would need to get new clothes soon enough but Izuku hoped he could rely on Shouto for that much. He packed a folding cane in case he was separated from Nedzu. With the news headlines he wanted to hide his condition as much as possible. He had a secret stash of money, which he gave to Nedzu to carry, and then had a brief fierce argument with him about the phones. In the end they left his personal phone behind (broken) and Nedzu kept the underground one. Izuku didn't think he was ever going to get it back.

Out in the parking lot Nedzu stopped him quietly.

"Fukushi hasn't left yet," he said.

"What's she doing?"

"Crying, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Looks like she's talking on the phone. She hasn't noticed us yet," said Nedzu. "Shit."

"What?"

"There's a black van pulling into the lot. I... don't like the look of it."

"We really need to get out of here. Do you think we can get out of here without them noticing?"

"We should be fine. We'll just take it slow."

Getting to the train station was fine. The train ride itself was nerve wracking. Even with his hood up and a mask on Izuku had no way of knowing if anyone was paying them any attention. Nedzu was hidden against his back, not wanting to risk being spotted by keeping watch. Izuku could feel him tapping away on the phone.

Izuku settled into looking straight ahead, trying to think normal thoughts. Head up, shoulders back! It then occurred to him that he had no idea if anyone was sitting across from him. Was he staring? Oh no, what if they thought he was being creepy? Should he just... keep looking forward like he's staring into space? Should he close his eyes? Would it be more or less suspicious to start staring at the floor?

Izuku tried smiling at the space ahead of him. Oh no, was it creepier to smile? No, Izuku was wearing a mask. No one would see it. *Probably a good thing.*

"There's no one across from us," Nedzu said softly.

Oh shit he was muttering now too. Real smooth, Izuku. Nedzu needs you to just... sit there. Like a

normal person. Izuku doesn't even need to talk! Just... be normal.

"You are a normal person," Izuku whispered to himself. *Oh my god no one says that*. Nedzu gave him a comforting pat on the back. He was probably wishing he was stuck with *anyone else*. Izuku resolved to bite his tongue for the remainder of the trip.

In the end they got to the safe house without incident, even if Izuku was dying a little bit from embarrassment. After keying through Shouto's security measures they were out of the warm spring air and into the cool sanctuary below.

"Wait, before we go further, is there anything in the hallway?"

"It looks like a frog?" said Nedzu.

"Is it cute?"

"Adorable."

"Shoot. Um. Any visible lasers?" Izuku said.

"What is it?"

"One of Momo's traps. The cuter it is the worse the danger. Uh," Izuku tapped his chin. Ever since Shouto's 'Scandal' debut they had learned the value of people underestimating you by your image. Momo had taken to the 'cute' label in a big way, which had also coincidently helped her merchandising line. Ochako had been furiously jealous. "How big is it? And what color?"

"Smaller than my paw and it's a bright blue."

"Poison gas, then. There will be a tripwire somewhere. Maybe."

"Izuku?" A voice called from ahead. Izuku jumped.

"Shouto? What the heck are you doing here?"

"I saw the news. I knew you would need to go to ground." There was a clicking sound as Shouto hopefully defused the cute little gas bomb. "It's safe now." They proceeded down the corridor to the meeting room Shouto insisted every bunker had. Hopefully there would be something to eat, Izuku was starving.

"But how did you know we'd be here specifically? We didn't contact anyone."

"It's the second nearest safe house from your apartment," Shouto said. There was the clink of glasses and plates. Nedzu hopped down once Izuku was sat by the low central table. "You would have wanted a bit more distance from home, but couldn't afford to be outside too long."

"Am I that predictable?"

"Only when you think nobody's watching," Shouto said. Izuku did not know how to feel about that. On the one hand, there was probably something really concerning in there. On the other, it was an opportunity to pick at Shouto's assumptions.

"But what if I didn't remember about this one? You have over a thousand safe houses."

"You know all of them," Shouto said. Tea was poured and Nedzu made a noise that had Izuku ducking his head before he could catch himself.

"Sorry, Midoriya," Nedzu said. Izuku waved a hand at him and a bun was placed in it.

"I couldn't possibly know all of them," Izuku protested. Sure, he knew a lot of them. They made useful landmarks.

"Fifth and Main," Shouto said.

"Oh, the one under the dessert shop. They give you a discount if they think you're going to a vigilante meeting," said Izuku before he could stop himself.

"Korisa street and Temple drive."

"I haven't seen that park in ages. Did they ever clean it up from that paint villain attack?" Izuku hadn't... hadn't memorized these. He just. Liked to keep an eye on what Shouto was up to. It was a survival tactic. They also made really useful hiding spots from the press.

"Pori and sixth," Shouto said. Izuku hummed through his bread.

"I thought you ruled that one out. Too close to a police station."

"Sakura and Cross."

"It's so close to the fish market it always stinks! But it does give you decent cover," Izuku said.

"Alpha and Yama."

"I didn't think you were able to get that property. The owner was really... aggressive."

"See?"

"What? That was like, five, and two I didn't even know!"

"Pori was a red herring. You even knew why we don't have one there. Yama isn't built yet. You know all of them."

Izuku did not sulk. He ate his bun. Then he ate another. He was hungry.

"Todoroki, have you ever considered teaching?" Nedzu asked after his second cup of tea had been poured.

"I think I would be very popular," Shouto said.

"If you knew that I know where all your bunkers are, how the hell did you think you were hiding your vigilante operation from me?" Izuku said. Shit. He wasn't here for a fight. Why couldn't he just... stay professional or something. *It wasn't that big of a deal* .

"It was a miscalculation. I am sorry," Shouto said.

"It was only a miscalculation because you got caught," Izuku grumbled. *Just stop Izuku.*

"We didn't want you to feel pressured to be involved. You were already so busy with everything it meant being a quirkless hero, we didn't want to burden you-"

"Didn't want me to be a burden, more like."

"Izuku. You know that's not what I meant," Shouto said.

Yeah. Sure. This was an Izuku problem. Izuku had to *understand. Izuku shouldn't expect people to respect -*

"But I know we screwed up. I screwed up. I know I don't always say the right thing, so I will prove you can trust me with my actions. Just. Just watch me. Maybe not *watch* , but. I won't let you down."

Izuku still found his easy tears embarrassing. A warm hand patted him gently on the shoulder. By the time they were done with their supper (6 PM... is here! said the little All Might clock) Izuku had got a hold of himself and Nedzu was sated with tea.

This also meant Nedzu had had six cups and was buzzing with caffeine.

"There are a few old contacts I want to check out. Todoroki, is Mosu Eisu still up and running?" Nedzu asked.

"Mosu Eisu? It's still running. It is also the most dangerous place you could go besides UA."

"We'll circle back to that UA comment later," Nedzu said. "Eisu has always been dangerous, but now would be the best time to go before anyone knows to expect me. I have a feeling as time goes on and Midoriya and I continue to avoid the authorities that movement will become more difficult. We should head there before it becomes a full man hunt."

"I don't like it, but I'll send you in with Tsu. She's been working with people there for a few months, she should know the lay of the land."

Ochako mentally patted herself on the back. It was really very easy to be left alone in the Veteran Affairs building. All you had to do was look very irritated and ask repeatedly to talk to the Director and no one wanted anything to do with you. Ochako waited in the empty meeting room for ten minutes before venturing out into the hall.

Now. All she had to do was find an unattended computer. Hopefully with helpful sticky note password reminders. For a square building there sure were a lot of halls! The offices were irregularly placed. It was a nightmare for finding your way around but created a lot of privacy for each workspace. Ochako found one office that was boxed in by too many filing cabinets and stacks of paper. There was no bag, jacket or coffee mug present, but many open packages of cough medicine and tissues. They may as well have written 'stress leave' in big blocky letters.

There were no helpful sticky notes with passwords.

Abandoning the computer Ochako started flipping through the sheer mass of papers scattered and stacked around the desk. A lot of the new papers had a bold "Past Due" printed across them. Looks like this was the person you went to to get paid!

Or not paid, as evidenced by the lack of movement on some of these. Six months to a year old.

This was what Izuku would call a 'paper trail', she was sure. So, what vendors did Veteran Affairs use? It looked like they were billing invoices to a number of different departments in veteran affairs. Skimming for 'Little Helpers' uncovered a particularly thick folder full of medical invoices.

Bingo!

All of the files referred back to one hospital. Ochako loved patterns. It seemed that Veteran Affairs only did business with the Bakuta Hospital, which had a division certified for practice with quirked animals. She sent off a text to Shouto; number six. He had already alphabetized his targets which lent itself to an easy code to work with. It was worse when he actually had time to come up with something.

Now that she had completed her primary mission she could have a look for Hitoshi. If he was being kept here... Well. There was one easy way to search the building.

Ochako pulled the fire alarm.

Momo was having the most awkward tea experience since Nedzu's famous "Is the tea poisoned or am I bluffing, also human expression is completely foreign to me. Good luck!" final exam. Across from her was Kendo, cane set across her lap. Her 'little helper' (sorry Nedzu) was a kid with a cat quirk. Or a cat with a kid quirk. It was hard to tell.

"You didn't even sign my retirement card," Kendo said.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know there was one?" Momo said weakly. She kept her eyes on her tea cup.

"That's worse."

"I-I know."

Momo pretends to take a sip. Her hands aren't steady enough to perform the surreptitious test for the common drugs. Kendo narrowed her eyes.

"You could ask me how I've been," she said. The words stuck in Momo's throat.

"Uh, how have... how have you been, Kendo?"

The sound of the ticking clock was overpowering. Kendo took her time crunching through one of the dainty cookies set out with the tea.

"I've been well," she finally answered.

"That's. Uh. That's good?" Momo said. Wow Kendo could glower. Had she developed a sight based quirk after the trauma of her injury?

"I've been keeping busy too, you know," she said. She drops a hand onto her companion's head. The kid leans into her side, curling up around his own mug of hot chocolate. "Were you aware of how Veteran Affairs recruits their... helpers? I've become quite familiar with their operations."

"Um. I have recently. Uh. Been made aware of the situation," Momo whispers.

"So you didn't know until now," Kendo said with a hint of smugness.

"That's why I'm here now," Momo said. Oh dear, that was probably the wrong thing to have said.

"Just a business visit then?" Kendo said. Shouto could learn a thing or two about ice from this one. Momo steeled her nerves.

"I am following up on a lead. I take it you've seen the news lately?"

"About Deku?" Kendo's face softened. "Is it... really him? I mean, a quirked mouse..." Momo nodded. Kendo closed her eyes and breathed out.

"He's okay," said Momo.

"So. What did you need to know?"

"It's. I have a question for...?"

"Nico."

"I have a question for you, Nico," Momo said, focusing on the shy boy. He met her eyes reluctantly but nodded. "Do you have a quirk?" He blinked. "I mean, one not based on being a cat? Something special only you can do?" Oh there went his tail, full bottle brush.

"Momo what the hell," Kendo scolded, scooping the hot chocolate out of the kid's hand before he could spill it. The kid was tearing up and shaking his head.

"I... used to stick to things," he said, quiet as anything. He looked down at his empty paws. "But it doesn't work any more." Momo slid to the floor and wrapped his hands with her own.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," she said, sympathetic tears in her eyes. "We think we might know what happened, but we need a little more information. Please, can you tell me when it stopped working?"

The kid had his ears pinned back now, eyes wide and frightened. Momo met Kendo's worried eyes.

"Hey Nico, It's okay," Kendo soothed. "She just wants to help. Like I told you before, there are people who just want to help. Like Mr. Monoma, who's going to help you find your Momma, right?"

"That's right," Momo said. Looked like Kendo was as good at retiring as Izuku was. "We don't know for sure yet, but the effect might be reversible. We just need a little bit more information about what happened, when or where."

"There was a man. He looked scary but he said it was going to be alright. I..." Nico swallowed. "I'm not supposed to talk about him." Momo looked at Kendo.

The phone call was an unwelcome interruption. Momo answered anyway.

"Uh, hi Momo?"

"Ochako?"

"Uh. I might need you to come get me."

"What's going on? Where are you?"

"Well I might have been... arrested?"

A Dangerous Game

Chapter Summary

In which Ochako has a conversation in a police station, and Nedzu and Izuku enter the lions den.

Chapter Notes

Big chapter! I wasn't sure how to break it up, so you get it all at once. Not super happy with the first half, hopefully it gets the point across

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ochako was pretty sure the coffee was an interrogation technique. She hadn't even had a sip yet and the smell made her eyes water. She wasn't able to brush away the tears as her hands were cuffed to the table.

Wait, did they expect her to drink like this?

She had been left in the bare room long enough for her butt to start hurting. Shifting around in the hard chair did nothing. Glaring at the one way mirror did less. Ochako wasn't truly concerned with her situation yet. Pulling a fire alarm in a public building wasn't a prosecutable offense (searching government documents *was* , but there was no evidence of that when they'd found her). They were either trying to make a point or had forgotten about her.

She'd wait for one of her legs to go numb before letting herself out.

Just then the door opened. A very keen, very sharply dressed official walked in, no police escort. The name badge clipped to his suit cited him as a hero commission official. People who worked for the commission seemed to fall into three categories; aggressively presentable, dull as dry paint and exhausted beyond reason, in descending order of fanaticism.

Oh... oh no.

The police had nothing on her, but the commission could make her life very uncomfortable with very little cause. But. She was here under questionable circumstances. Perhaps they were here on her behalf. Police and heroes had a rather antagonistic relationship after all.

But *Ochako's* relationship with the hero commission wasn't much better.

Ochako smiled brightly at the man. His eye twitched. He sat down across from her primly and tapped his binder onto the table.

"Uraraka Ochako, Hero name Uravity. Do you know why you are here?" he asked. Ochako shook her head.

(Aizawa Shouta's Lying 101, Lesson One; set yourself up as an obviously bad liar.)

"W-what's this about?" she asked. She flicked her eyes up to meet his briefly. He did not look impressed. She looked down at her hands.

"My name is Mr. Shinja. I am with the hero commission." Ochako nodded. The name was familiar to her. She wished she could remember from where. He opened the binder in front of him and Ochako could see it contained a summary of her official record. "You were brought in this morning for disrupting the Veteran Affairs office by pulling the fire alarm. Ignoring protocol, you did not evacuate with the office, and instead remained behind where you were eventually found rifling through sensitive documents."

"I... what?" Ochako had not been rifling through anything when the police had found her. Hitoshi hadn't been in any of the rooms in the building, but there had been a loose vent cover in an office with the lock on backwards. She had been found halfway into the vent. Someone had falsified their arrest report, likely to make it more legitimate. She wasn't sure if this was dramatic irony.

"Would you care to explain what happened in your own words?"

"Well, well... I was waiting for the director to come talk to me? And. I thought I smelled something *burning* . So I pulled the alarm and started sweeping the building for any stragglers and-
"

"It would behoove you not to lie, Ms. Uraraka," Shinja said. Ochako bit her lip.

"I'm not lying," she said weakly. Shinja raised an eyebrow. Ochako sighed.

(Aizawa Shouta's Lying 101, Lesson Two; stick to the truth as much as possible.)

"I wasn't looking through documents. They found me in an empty part of the building," she said quietly.

"Which brings us to my next question. Why were you in the Veteran Affairs building at all?"

"I... I saw it on Deku's phone a couple days ago."

"You've been in contact with Deku?"

"Just... just the once. He's been avoiding me. I was worried."

"Was it his personal phone?"

"No... no. It was his work phone."

"I wasn't aware he had one for work. He had nothing listed."

Shit, too much information.

Ochako shrugged. "I don't know, that's just what he called it. It was plain, no hero case or anything like I would expect."

"And he showed you this work phone?"

"Uh, no, I kinda... found it?" Ochako looked at the one way mirror, avoiding her own gaze.

"You... found it," the agent repeated dryly.

"I... kinda took it? I... just needed to know..."

"What exactly did you see?"

"It was just a location marker, no text. It was the only unread message since he... retired."

"And who was this message from?"

"There wasn't a name."

"Do you recall the number?"

"It, uh, started with an 8? I think? Sorry, I'm not really good at remembering numbers," Ochako said.

"Who do you think it was from?"

"Probably one of his contacts? I was kind of hoping the Veteran Affairs building would give me answers."

"And what possessed you to investigate, and not just ask him?"

Ochako bit her lip and looked down at her lap.

(Aizawa Shouta's Lying 101, Lesson Three; don't say more than you need to. Let them fill in the blanks.)

"Deku's been... well. He pulled away from his friends after the accident. I just wanted..." Ochako let herself trail off.

"Wanted what?"

"I was worried about him, okay? Deku's. He's always been reckless. I just wanted to help him."

Shinja does not look convinced. To be fair he doesn't look much of anything. It could just be his face. Instead he opens the binder to a page of mostly white space. He turns it around towards her.

"And what about this message you sent while in the building? Sent out just before you pulled the fire alarm?"

What the shit, this was a print out of her text messages .

"How the hell do you have these?" Ochako couldn't hide the tightness in her voice.

"They were requisitioned by the arresting officer. Would you care to explain?"

(Aizawa Shouta's Lying 101, Lesson Four; involuntary physical reactions are often more convincing than a blank face, depending on your personality.)

Izuku had always been good with tears. He could cry at the drop of a hat. Ochako had never really figured that out, but she was very good at blushing. She let the heat rise up over her cheeks and leaned into the embarrassment.

"It has nothing to do with Deku," she said.

"And what does it have to do with, Ms Uraraka? 'Number six', to an unknown number right before pulling a fire alarm in a building you have no business in."

"Ah... um. It was to Scandal," Ochako said. Weariness crept over Shinja's face.

"Scandal," he said. Ochako gained three points of respect for Shouto with the sheer amount of exhaustion just his reputation could cause. It was like an instant 'Hitoshi before coffee' effect. Shouto's obsession with weaponized obfuscation was an excellent deterrent for most lines of questioning. Trying to uncover just what Shouto was going on about at any point of time usually just ended in frustrated embarrassment. Shouto thrived on it. "And what... why did you text this to Scandal?"

"Uh. How far back do you want me to start with that? Because when he got engaged to Yuga we had to have a talk about-"

"I'm going to stop you there, Ms. Uraraka. Let's stick to the pertinent facts. What does number six refer to?"

"Oh, it's a code."

"For...?"

Ochacko blushed fiercely. Shinja sighed. "We really do need you to tell us out loud, Ms. Uraraka, as this is an open investigation."

"Uh well, I've been coaching him? With Yuga, and the engagement we came up with a bit of a code for it all? Shouto is. He's particular? I promised to help him with the 'random acts of romance'. I give him a cue and he does the corresponding romantic thing, like. I thought I would be busy for a while with searching the building so I sent one off before pulling the alarm."

"Is that what these 'love bug' and 'strawberry' texts are about?"

"He made me eat the key."

"I'm. Sure." Ah yes, he was very familiar with Scandal's operations then. Lucky her. "So these communications are not related to your activity in the Veteran Affairs building. Ms. Uraraka, why did you feel the need to search the building through unofficial channels? You are an active hero, you could have brought your concerns to us."

"Concerns for what? A location on my friend's phone that I wasn't supposed to see? I wasn't even sure what I was looking for."

"Did you find anything?"

(Aizawa Shouta's Lying 101, Lesson Final; don't overdo it.)

"I found a bunch of empty offices with the locks on backwards."

Shinja pinched the bridge of his nose. "Anything else?" Ochako shook her head.

"Hey, why is the hero commission so concerned about the Veteran Affairs building anyway? I thought you were here to lecture me on conduct or something, but this is a full investigation. What's going on?"

Shinja closed the binder and leveled her with a piercing look. He tapped his fingers on the table. "There has been a lot of suspicious activity around the Veteran Affairs office lately. Vigilante activity."

Ochako sucked in a breath. *Oops.*

"We have so far been able to keep it under wraps, but we've made very little progress. When we find one of our own hero's going off the record to infiltrate it as well, it's suspicious. We've been keeping it out of the public eye, but vigilante activity is possibly the greatest threat to the public right now."

"More than villains?" Ochako blinked.

"Villains haven't been as much of a problem for a few years now, thanks to the efficiency of the hero system." *Yeah right.* "But to prevent public panic we've been trying to handle it quietly."

"But I'm not the public, or a civilian. Why haven't you been keeping the heroes in the loop?"

"Because we don't know which of the heroes are involved. We have a small task force that has been working diligently for a few years now, but the operation has been kept tight to a few trusted individuals. Consider this me looping you in."

Well shit.

"As a hero, Ms. Uraraka, though it is only natural that you wanted to help your friend," Shinja said. "You must agree that your actions could be seen as suspicious."

"I was trying to help Deku."

"I'm going to be frank with you, Ms Uraraka," Shinja said. "We've been concerned with Deku for some time. It had seemed to be a moot point after he was retired, but now that he's gone missing-"

"Missing!?" Ochako interrupted. Oops. She shut her mouth quickly. The agent met her eyes and relaxed.

"Missing. I think we can help each other, Ms. Uraraka. You are a hero in good standing. A workhorse, not too big of a following, but dependable. We wouldn't want you getting into any avoidable trouble. You have ties to a prime person of interest, though it seems that you aren't privy to the trouble he is in."

"Trouble?" Ochako said weakly.

"I won't lie, it is possible that Deku is involved with something illegal."

"Deku wouldn't... he. Deku's a hero..."

"Deku might not have had a choice," Shija said, leaning back. "We are well aware of the challenges faced by quirkless heroes, it's possible he just got caught up in something too big for him to handle. Regardless, you could help shed some light on the situation before it's too late. You might not like the reality of the situation, but I believe in the end you will do what's right.

"So, Ms. Uraraka, will you help us?"

(Todoroki Shouto's Espionage 101, Lesson One; If anyone ever, *ever* , gives you a chance to be a double agent, take it.)

"I'll do my best."

Mosu Eisu wasn't so much a place as a scene. The location shifted organically with the poorest, least patrolled portion of the city. It was hell to track down and by the time you had organized a big enough group for a bust it would have already moved on. Like a traveling circus for blood sports.

They met Asui in a street near the docks. She was not happy about Nedzu's plan.

"You want to meet with Giran? The only reason I am still alive is because I never deal with him. It's reckless," Asui said.

"Caution is the privilege of those with time and resources. We have neither. He is a dangerous man, but he is dangerous because he usually knows everything worth knowing," said Nedzu.

The warehouse Asui led them to was dark. Broken glass and various shipping garbage was scattered around the loading bays. It stank like fish and iron. Two heavily mutated men sat smoking next to a dark entrance. Asui walked up to them and tossed a coin to the taller one.

"New recruits?" He grumbled, squinting at the coin before pocketing it.

"Something like that," Asui said. She stood with her arms out as the shorter one waved a metal tube at her in a half-hearted arc. He was already moving towards Midoriya before it lit green.

"You gave them the rundown, right Tsu-chan? We're not going to have any trouble with the newbies?"

This was going to be the first hurdle. Thanks to the weirdly focused news headlines all anyone was talking about was Deku. There was no way they were not going to be recognized, especially with Midoriya's still healing face. Hopefully, Midoriya's status as retired would work in their favor. Nedzu tapped Midoriya's shoulder to get him to remove the hood. Slowly, he lowered it and removed his mask.

"Holy shit, it's Deku," said the shorter one. The taller one laughed.

"Slumming it with us, eh Deku?" he said. Midoriya shifted on his feet. "Finally decided to come visit us now that you can't see our ugly faces?"

"Doesn't do anything for the smell," Midoriya said. "Ah! S-s-sorry, it just slipped o-o-out, I didn't mean-" The two guards laughed.

"Just cause you're funny doesn't mean we're going to let you through without checking to see if you're as foolish as you look. Arms out, Deku," the taller one called. Tsu had warned them not to bring anything metal. They would be cautious of a quirkless hero with support items, blind or not. "So where's the rat?"

Nedzu raised his head up from behind Midoriya's shoulders. Until they were face to face with Giran there was no point in him drawing any extra attention. It was simple enough to be dismissed as an animal as long as you kept your mouth shut.

"Shiiit, someone's done a number on him," the shorter one said. Nedzu was confused until the guy lifted a hand to his own eye in sympathy. Midoriya flinched.

"What? What's wrong with him?" he asked.

"Someone tried to take out his eye."

"Ah no, that's an old wound," Midoriya said, relaxing. Did they really not recognize him? He had never had a huge media presence, but pictures had been unavoidable as principal of UA. It was. It was useful, not to be recognized, but.

The past felt more and more like a dream.

"So what's with the stick, Deku?" the tall one asked. He'd taken the folded cane from Midoriya's pocket when the cylinder had flashed orange.

"What, a blind man can't have a cane?" Midoriya asked.

"Not a metal one, and not on an ex-pro," shorty said.

"Seriously?"

"You didn't look like you needed it to walk up to the gate," said the taller.

"Yeah, cause Tsu was leading the way. Come on guys, you've seen me do more unarmed than what I could do with a flimsy stick." Probably not the best argument, but the taller one looked considering.

"You start shit in there and I'll show you how much damage a flimsy stick can do," he eventually said, handing the thing back to Midoriya.

"They're just here to talk, kero," Asui said. "You know I still need to be able to do business here."

"Yeah, sure. Just make sure he talks to Giran first. He told us to send Deku to him if he showed up."

Wait. What? Nedzu pulled on the harness strap as Midoriya took a breath to speak. Midoriya exhaled soundlessly. They were probably in more danger than anticipated. At least they wouldn't have to argue their way to see Giran first. Hopefully they could get enough information before the inevitable catch. Tsu gave him a steady look. Last chance to turn back. Nedzu nodded towards the door.

They were waved through the open doorway. As soon as they breached the perimeter the darkness fell away. Heavy bass rumbled the air and spot lights illuminated the central ring. People shouted and stamped their feet as the fighters in the ring exchanged quirk enhanced blows. The air was tropical in temperature and humidity but the smell was all seedy bar. It was lively and crowded and Nedzu could barely hear himself guide Midoriya along.

Tsu pulled them out of the way towards the edge of the warehouse.

"You'll find Giran there," she said over the music, pointing at a raised section on the far end of the warehouse. "I'll keep watch on you from there." Asui indicated a place between their target and the bar. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

Nedzu met her concerned gaze. Every affirmation felt like a mistake; like one more step down the wrong path. However, every plan made to subvert the expectations of the enemy felt that way. Optimal moves were too predictable.

Nedzu nodded. Asui pulled Midoriya into a hug.

"Stay safe," she said.

"I'll do my best. Plus Ultra," Midoriya answered.

Then they were off. The music and crowd got quieter the closer they got to the VIP section, likely the effect of a quirk. Soon they were stopped by the entrance in front of some worryingly competent looking guards.

"Not you," the burly man with rock skin said. Midoriya was halted with a hand to his chest. "Only the rat." Nedzu took a deep breath and steeled his nerves. He did not want to be separated; nothing about this was safe. Midoriya brought a hand up to rest on his paw.

"I'll be okay," he said softly. "I'll be right here." Yes, alone, blind and surrounded by experienced muscle. While Nedzu went and talked to a villain.

Nedzu was ushered down off Midoriya's shoulders and up onto the makeshift lounge with a good view of the action but well out of the splash zone of the fighting pit. He only had a faint plan on how he was going to handle this. The trouble was it relied on a character profile five years out of date.

"Ah, if it isn't the principal!" Giran called. He was seated on an opulent European sofa clearly at odds with the storage crates and pallets around him. This section was full of the more powerful people of interest where wait staff floated around with trays of interesting drinks. Fine furniture was scattered artfully around, close enough to be a grouping, but far enough apart that business could be conducted privately. It seemed Giran had moved up in the world since Nedzu last dealt with him.

"Giran," Nedzu greeted. He climbed up on the couch across from the man and sat stiffly, formally, on the embroidered white cushions. A small coffee table sat between them. Giran ordered tea for Nedzu from a passing wait staff.

"You aren't still mad about the whole League of Villains thing are you?"

Nedzu was still totally mad about that, but it wasn't useful right now. Giran was just trying to rile him up.

"Water under the bridge," Nedzu said airily. Giran raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"I expected a little more than that! When your failsafes tore through the administration five years ago I thought for sure there would be a little surprise for me, but nothing."

"You've always been good at surviving," Nedzu said. Five years ago Giran had been almost as entrenched as Nedzu. It hadn't been quite worth the risk to route him.

"When people call me a rat, I tell them I'm in good company," Giran said with a smile.

"And yet I am not flattered," said Nedzu.

"Can't please everyone," Giran said. He took a drink off a passing tray, setting it next to his currently half full one. A greedy opportunist in every situation. It made him predictable if you knew as much as the broker did about the lay of the land. Unfortunately, you never had to deal with Giran if you already knew everything. "So what's got your back up?"

"You know why I'm here," Nedzu said. Giran squinted at him.

"No, I don't believe I do! I'm actually quite surprised you resurfaced at all, let alone came directly to me. You used to be quite clever, you know. Has something changed?"

Sometimes silence was an answer unto itself. Nedzu did not have a better one.

"You see, rumor has it you've lost your edge," said Giran.

"That's hardly a rumor. I've been gone for five years. I hope you didn't pay too much for something any fool could tell you, Giran," Nedzu said. He waved away the cup of tea presented to him by one of the wait staff. It was rude to decline, but Nedzu was already playing the game on the back foot. He could afford to give a little offense in the name of caution.

"Haven't lost your teeth at the very least! No, normally I wouldn't bother with such things except for where I heard it."

"And who did you hear that from?" Nedzu asked. He had a sinking feeling. Giran was being too open with him. Answering questions, offering leading tidbits. Nedzu couldn't yet see the trap but he could feel it.

"He's only known as the Informant," Giran said. "Boring, I know, but accurate." Giran takes a sip of his drink and closed his eyes in pleasure. It chilled Nedzu. Giran was as meticulous and paranoid as any underground player worth his salt. That he would drop his guard so openly...

"You know how to contact him?" Nedzu asked. With Giran being uncommonly forthcoming Nedzu didn't need finesse. He would save it for the inevitable negotiation of payment.

"That's the thing. You don't find him, he finds you. Exactly when and where you need him to be. He gives you a target, or a name, or tip off, and no matter how random it seems to be you follow his advice and it pays off; all it costs is a favor."

"A favor?"

"A bit of larceny, a bit of protection, a whisper in the right ear. All small jobs, never seemingly connected, but this guy... " Giran trailed off.

"Have you talked with him?"

"I talk with everyone!" Giran threw his arms wide, spilling his drink on one of his stoic guards. The man hardly blinked.

"Has he come to you?"

Giran met Nedzu's eyes. His smile dropped and posture stiffened. He leaned across the low table so that when he spoke only Nedzu could hear.

"Today I got a call. Unknown number, unfamiliar voice, the whole shebang. Told me the wildest story, and I've heard some fantastic stories. Said I'd be getting a visit from an old friend. Said this friend maybe wasn't what he used to be, maybe this friend doesn't rightly know what he's doing anymore. Said I should maybe keep this friend from leaving. For his own good."

Well fuck.

"Normally I don't like to take advice from unknown sources. Not a good look, right? But, the problem is, I owe a favor."

Fuck. Giran had known he was coming. Worse, the Informant knew. This informant was the lead Nedzu had been looking for, but learning he was still two steps behind was not the ideal outcome.

"What do you want?" Nedzu asked. Giran looked mildly surprised.

"Oh I've got everything I want."

Nedzu laughed. "I find that hard to believe. You're a greedy bastard. What do you want?" Giran narrowed his eyes.

"I want to repay a favor. Get the Informant off my back."

"I find it hard to believe that you're ok with someone else pulling the strings. Someone who's motivations are unpredictable to you. That's got to get under your skin."

"I'm not a proud man," Giran said. "I can admit when someone has me beat."

"He scares you," Nedzu said.

" *You* scared me," said Giran. "And you disappeared shortly after the Informant showed up. You want to tell me there's nothing to be scared about?"

"I'm the one that's going to take him down," Nedzu said.

"Save yourself first. Boys!" Giran flicked a hand at his guards. Surprisingly they swept past Nedzu and towards the entrance.

"What are you doing?"

"He was very insistent that I handle this in a particular way," Giran said. By the entrance to the VIP lounge Midoriya let out a shout as he was grabbed by the two, his arms pinned to his sides. The two bodyguards started to march him towards the fighting pit. Nobody in the lounge so much as flinched at the action.

Nedzu ducked under the hand coming for his neck and rolled under the couch. Giran let out a curse as he ducked down to make a grab for Nedzu's tail. Suddenly the couch was removed and a heavy arm had Nedzu pinned back against a rock hard chest. Nedzu bit down hard but nearly broke his teeth on the rocky skin. The arm pinned Nedzu and squeezed. Short panting breaths were all he could manage, and when he tried to call for Midoriya all he could get out was a wheeze. Beside them Giran straightened.

"No hard feelings, eh? It's all just business." Giran lacked his typical smile. A pathway was cleared for the men hauling Midoriya away to the ring, which was being boxed in with a high metal mesh fence with a roof.

The announcer began his spiel.

"And tonight we have something truly special! For the first time ever we've got Pro-Hero Deku!"

The crowd, even through the dampened lounge, was thunderous. The floor shook as they took note of the new contender. Midoriya yelled something at the crowd and then clothing and debris were being thrown towards him. Asui was trying to push her way forward to the front of the crowd but wasn't getting far in the heaving mass. Midoriya seemed to be holding onto whatever he could catch from the crowd.

"Giran, what exactly did he tell you to do?" Nedzu asked. Giran scratched his ear. The rock skin man went to hold Nedzu tighter but Giran waved him off.

"It's fine, he's not going anywhere. He won't leave without his student." Giran sighed and ran a hand down his face. "Look. I mean it. No hard feelings. You just don't fuck with this guy, right?"

"You've already got me. What could it hurt to get my perspective on him? You can't tell me you wouldn't rather he was gone."

Giran glared up at the rock-skinned man, who stoically looked forward. "Not a word to anyone about this," Giran said. The man nodded. "He told me to catch you and kill Deku."

Nedzu hissed and struggled futilely until black spots swam across his vision. There had to be something, anything, he could use.

"Theatrics aren't like you," Nedzu wheezed. "You said he was specific. How?"

Giran frowned at the ring where Midoriya had been dumped. The cage was closed behind him. The crowd was shaking the fence and the floor with their energy. "He said it had to make tomorrow's headlines. Deku, that is. You can disappear quietly. Preferably quietly. For a guy who's so shadowy and mysterious, he sure is concerned about the media."

"That's the most useful thing you've said all night," said Nedzu. "Has he mentioned the news before?"

Giran nodded. "Anyone I've talked to that he's called in a favor from has mentioned the news. It seems to be his preferred form of proof."

"What exactly did he tell you about me? Phrasing included please."

"He said 'The rat is useful to me alive. He shouldn't be nearly as hard to contain as he used to be, so long as you can separate him from Deku. He's not nearly as sharp as he once was."

Well, true. But not for the reasons their Informant probably thought. Nedzu chittered his teeth.

"I have a theory."

"Oh?"

"I don't think the Informant knows nearly as much as he thinks he does."

"He knew you were going to be here," Giran said.

"I know for a fact that what he thinks was done to me didn't work. And I know why. And I think that it doesn't make sense for an omniscient informant to be using news headlines of all things, as proof of payment. You and I both know how reliable those can be."

A burly man was making his way to the stage. The crowd was yelling and stomping for him and he paused often to soak in the announcer's praise.

"So what do you want me to do? Let you go on the off chance he doesn't, what, notice?" Giran asked.

"No, you let me go on the off chance I can destroy him."

"He kept you contained for five years. Please understand my hesitation," said Giran.

"I have Midoriya now."

"Midoriya's about to be *paste."*

Nedzu regarded the stage with a critical eye. Midoriya's opponent was twice his size and three times as broad. He's wearing pants, combat boots and not much else. He had a mutation quirk of some sort, but Nedzu couldn't pinpoint what. He was yelling into the crowd like a berserker and they were yelling back.

On the other side of the ring Midoriya had a hand gripped into the mesh of the cage. His other arm was wrapped in a white cloth. He'd tied his hoodie and harness to the fence and bound his hair more tightly. He was stretching his neck, shoulders raising and lowering as he took deep breaths. He was calm; he had a plan. Asui wasn't trying to break down the fence.

"How about a wager?" Nedzu said. Giran looked at him in disbelief. "If Midoriya wins, you let us go out the back. You bribe someone to break the news he's dead, quietly killed for getting in your way. We lay low until your informant has his headline."

"If he doesn't, then you cooperate with me."

"Either way it ends, you don't tell the informant about this conversation."

Giran taps his chin in thought, regarding the ring and the two fighters. "Deal." He turns on his heel and hones in on a small man taking tokens from the various patrons.

"Where are you going?"

"Double or nothing, rat. If you think he has a chance... well. The odds on a blind man are going to be phenomenal."

Introductions of the two fighters were finally complete. The crowd was whipped into a fine frenzy. Midoriya's opponent was still not quite done with his theatrics, but he seemed to be onto the trash talk portion of his speech. The sound had risen in the VIP lounge. Everyone paused in their business to watch the fight.

"... AND I AM GOING TO *CRUSH YOU* !" The large man bellowed.

"Wait, Balloon time!?" Midoriya asked from the ring.

Chapter End Notes

I lied, i brought Balloon Time back. He's a character now. Sorry.

Fight!

Chapter Summary

Deku VS Balloon Time!

Chapter Notes

A cheesy fight chapter indulgence.

~Earlier in the day~

"So. Balloon Time. He's new?" Izuku had asked.

"Ugh" said Shouto.

"What does he do?"

"He. Ugh. He's horrible."

"Specifically, how. Because I can't watch videos anymore Shouto, you need to tell me. Is he a bad match up for you or what?"

"It is definitely a bad match," Shouto's voice is sinking lower to the ground for some reason. "He has pockets of space in his body that he can fill with air to become much bigger. Like a Balloon Man. But he's a Balloon man with teeth."

Shouto's voice was coming from the floor now. Izuku nudged him with his toe.

"What is this that you're doing now? Are you laying on the floor?"

"It's something I learned from Aoyama. I am laying on the ground in despair. Did you know you can express your emotions with your *whole body*?"

"Are you sure this is just going to be a sham marriage with Yuga? Because you are allowed to actually stay married to someone if you're happy," Izuku crouched down next to where he thinks Shouto is.

"This is just the engagement, Izuku. How glorious the wedding will be, and how much more spectacular the divorce!"

"We should never have introduced you to soap operas. So. Balloon Time has an inflation quirk?"

"Ugh. So he can expand twenty times his size by sucking in the air around him, or water on one very memorable occasion. He's like a balloon but he won't pop because he's all muscle. When he's not expanded he's very dense and it hurts to punch him. He's loud. I don't know if his lungs expand too, but he can still yell while filled with water. The worst part is when he deflates. He's got all

these valves on his body that let the air out. If he does it quickly enough he can fling himself around with air propulsion. It sounds like ten flatulent old men. I hate it." The last part of Shout's explanation was muffled. Probably by a dramatic arm thrown over his face.

"So how do you usually handle him?"

"I usually just wait for him to start inflating. Depending on the day and whether Endeavor is watching I will surround him with super heated or super cooled air. He inflates very quickly; it's how he throws so many cars at me. But it also means he doesn't have time to stop before he's inhaled an inferno or ice storm."

On the one hand, Izuku was lucky. He knew exactly what he was getting into. On the other, he was now facing a very angry man with a powerful quirk who likely wouldn't stop until he was dead.

"THAT IS NOT MY FUCKING NAME!" the man bellowed. He drowned out the crowd; Shouto was right; he was loud. Izuku unfolded his cane.

"Then what is?" Izuku asked, biting down mid span on the cane. He'd need both hands for this fight, but maybe it could still be of use; like cat whiskers! There was a high chance of losing teeth this way but his main concern was not losing his head. He swung his head to either side, tapping the cage to get a feel for it.

In some ways he was glad there was a mesh cage. It gave him a lot of maneuverability options! He suspected that the cage was there to keep him from running out of the ring and escaping through the crowd which would have been the ideal first plan.

"YOU CAN JUST CALL ME DEATH!" Balloon Time said. The crowd, though, had already picked up on Shouto's nickname and were chanting it. Stretching out the 'o's in an unflattering way. Izuku smiled around the cane. He raised a fist to the crowd.

"DEKU!" They shouted back at him. A mob was a strange thing. There were only two people in this whole place that really wanted him to walk out alive. Everyone else just wanted to see a fight. Normally when you threw two grossly unmatched people into a ring it wasn't a contest; it was hardly worth looking up from your phone for. In this instance Izuku was the favored underdog. This was his first time participating in any sort of organized blood sport, but.

This was no different from any other fight in his entire career.

"AND NOW, WHAT ALL YOU PEOPLE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR, DEKU VERSUS BALLOON TIME! START!" cried the announcer.

"I'M GOING TO RIP YOU APART!"

The stage bounced under the weight of heavy steps. Izuku hooked both hands into the mesh behind him and swung himself up into a handstand against it. Below, Balloon time ran into the mesh and bent it outward. Izuku let himself fall as the cage warped, rolling off the man's back and onto the floor.

Izuku didn't want to lose track of his opponent yet. He let his arm with the towel trail down the man's back over strange bumps that must be the valves for his quirk. He fell into a crouch and went

to go for a throw by lifting one of the man's legs but...

Balloon time was heavy. Izuku couldn't budge him.

"WHAT IS A RUNT LIKE YOU EVEN GOING TO DO? YOU'RE BARELY A MAN!"

He was also reaching down to grab Izuku's shirt. Izuku whipped his head around and hit something but the cane was knocked out of his mouth, thankfully not taking any teeth with it. Balloon Time shouted at the impact and flung Izuku across the stage.

"I'M GOING TO FUCKING CRUSH YOU LIKE A BUG!"

Where was he getting these lines?

As Izuku hit the mesh on the far side he heard a hissing noise and felt a sudden wind pull the heat from the crowd past him, fast enough to tug at his clothing. *He'd activated his quirk*.

Izuku caught the mesh behind him before gravity could catch up with him. Izuku brought his legs up to brace for a leap. There was no way to know how high up he was, but he would need to move quickly regardless. Balloon Time was going to...

Ten flatulent old men. Todoroki hadn't been exaggerating. At least the movement wasn't quiet, but the man was fast. Before Izuku could even tense his legs to spring he was caught around the middle by his opponent. All the air left Izuku at once and the noise from the crowd dimmed into an indeterminate roaring that beat in time with his heart. Balloon Time's shoulder was firmly wedged into Izuku's gut and driven in further as he landed back down on the stage. Izuku didn't have enough air left to even make a sound.

"DIE!"

Like Izuku hadn't heard that one before.

Regardless he pounded away on Balloon Time's back. It was like hitting a slab of steel. Izuku's bracers and the towel absorbed most of the impact, but it hardly seemed to matter to the man. Balloon Time had him in a fireman's carry, arms tight around Izuku's waist. Izuku slapped an arm back towards the man's head, aiming for the ear. *That* got his attention at least.

"KNOW WHEN YOU'RE BEAT!"

As the man reared back and shook his head Izuku lifted his torso up and twisted to reach the man's front. There were details about this quirk he hadn't thought to ask Shouto, like where the air went in. It had happened much too quickly to rely on the typical airways. Izuku dug his fingers along the man's front and noticed a series of ridges running horizontally. *Gills?* He couldn't get his fingers between them before he'd been thrown to the ground with a cry of rage. Sensitive.

"AND FUCKING STAY DOWN!"

Izuku was able to get one gasping breath before a kick sent him flying back. Being thrown around was very disorienting, but it was better than being kept in once spot while the monster pounded him to a pulp. Once again he hit mesh, his weight bent the fence outward into the crowd and he felt hands push him back into the ring.

Izuku coughed as he landed back on the floor, rolling away from the stomping feet headed in his direction. *He had to keep moving*.

Balloon time was a dense packet of meat but even with his mass he should have started slowing down by now. Izuku had managed to tag him at least five times with the towel carefully wrapped around his arm (around his bracer, not in contact with his skin). It seemed that he would have to get more creative. The towel was still his best weapon.

It was an old trick from their school days; Tsu would give him a suspiciously damp cloth and Izuku would apply the contact poison. Luckily she had been able to get something to him before the match; he'd recognized it as soon as he smelt it. Balloon time seemed to have gills on his torso that allowed for rapid intake of surrounding air. All he had to do was spread the cloth across his opponents chest and the guy would aerosolize it when he went for expansion, ingesting the poison into his theoretically more delicate interior.

Simple.

It was then that Balloon Time twisted his hand in Izuku's shirt as he went for a roll. The momentum from the roll and a sharp tug from Balloon Time had the shirt ripping. Izuku came away missing half a shirt.

And the sleeve with the towel.

Shit.

But. Balloon time was. Holding the towel. Or at least, was very near the towel.

Get him to expand.

Izuku spun up from the ground and ran till he hit one of the mesh walls. He leapt up and caught hold, launching himself up like his life depended on it (it did). Behind him Balloon Time roared, and then he *hissed*. Air whipped past him and there was a noise like a cross between a snore and a grass whistle.

Had it worked?

Balloon Time launched himself at Izuku with an inarticulate cry of rage. He caught Izuku by his foot and pulled down. Izuku *dropped*. Izuku's reflexes had him rolling even as he lost feedback from his body. He was vaguely aware of a huge impact beside him and the sudden loss of mobility as a large hand grabbed his face.

Izuku clawed at the hand but his gloved fingers lacked purchase. His chest was heaving as he tried to take in air that just *wasn't coming*.

Balloon Time was swearing in a constant litany. Some part of Izuku recognized that the voice was losing volume, but the rest of him was busy *trying to stay alive*. Suddenly the hand dropped from his face and Izuku was able to gasp a breath. Immediately after his legs were crushed under an immense weight.

Hopefully the lack of swearing meant his opponent had passed out. Balloon Time had impressive lung capacity.

Izuku couldn't hear much over the crowd chanting his name. Someone grabbed his arm and lifted it above his head. This someone was saved a vicious punch by the wave of exhaustion that overtook him.

"3...2...1... AND HE'S DOWN! DEKU WINS AGAINST THE INFLATABLE CLOWN! HE'S DONE IT!"

Nedzu released his breath. Midoriya had prevailed. He always had been good in a pinch. He was being helped shakily to his feet as the audience rattled the walls with chants of what sounded like 'Deku Wrecks You!'. Asui had managed to force her way onto the stage and wrapped one of his arms over her shoulder. She would keep him safe.

Now it was Nedzu's turn to get them out.

Beside him Giran lit a cigar. He smiled in a way that had Nedzu's hackles rise.

"Oh don't look at me like that," Giran said. He waved one of the bouncers over and indicated that Midoriya should be brought to the lounge. "You got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"That remains to be seen, Giran."

"So suspicious! Well. You're not wrong to be!" He chuckled to himself. "But you also aren't wrong that I want this Informant gone. And you still have Deku. You weren't wrong about him either."

Giran took a few slow puffs of smoke, tapping his knee thoughtfully.

"You really think you can take him out?" Giran asked quietly.

"We have to," Nedzu said.

"I'll take that bet," Giran said. "Just make sure you stay low for a few days."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well. I think I just won myself an all-expenses-paid getaway. It's about time for a little vacation."

Many Moving Parts

Chapter Summary

Shouto sets a motion in plan and... something happens.

Chapter Notes

Ah, the chapter I promised myself I'd never do. There's no Nedzu or Izuku here at all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouto sat across from Aoyama. The other man gazed adoringly back. He had a lot of sparkles in his eyes. (He had a lot of sparkles in general). If Shouto were to shine a light on him he would refract into rainbows.

Kind of like, if Shouto were to ask him a question he would get a prismatic answer. He was like a random number generator for chaos. Shouto had no idea how he did it. It took Shouto hours to pick a random number.

"Aoyama. Darling. Light of my life, Sparkle of my heart. I have a question," said Shouto, as was the way. Aoyama made a high pitched noise that was probably bad for his throat. Shouto pushed the ornate strawberry milkshake his fiancé had ordered closer to his face.

"Anything, mon cher," Aoyama said, ignoring the milkshake. Shouto wasn't sure if he had ordered it to eat it or to look at. Aoyama was doing neither right now. Had he bought it to match the red sequins on his outfit? Incredible.

"I need a distraction," Shouto asked.

"Oh darling, you *are* a distraction~," Aoyama said.

Beside him, Sero choked.

"Uh, why am I here again?" Sero asked, trying to bury his face in the menu. It wasn't very effective. The menu was practically transparent.

"Because you need the money," said Shouto. He had been very clear. Sero's face changed color.

"Uh, but what exactly am I here to do? You guys just seem to be on a... date?"

"You're here to assist," Shouto informed him.

"With the date?" Sero asked in a very high pitched tone.

"Are you volunteering~?" Aoyama fixed his bright eyes on Sero. He batted his eyes and leaned forward. It seemed Sero was now incapable of speech. Shouto could relate; it was magnificent. Aoyama did nothing without putting his all into it.

But. They were here for business.

"I need to distract the hospital staff in Bakuta in order for Hagakure to case the joint." Hagakure had been very clear that that was the code phrase. She had also insisted on wearing a fedora. It would have been stylish if she'd been wearing anything else as well.

"Shouto, buddy, should you really just be talking about that out in the open?" Sero looked around nervously. There was only a bored man hanging around the till. *They had the best cold soba, and now, the best deals in black market support gear.*

"There is no security risk here. We are the only customers, and this place is a front," Shouto said.

"How do you know that!?" Sero looked at the menu with concern.

"I should be able to recognize a front I'm operating." Shouto frowned. He knew he didn't always pick up on nuance, but he wasn't careless. Sero was looking at him with a furrowed brow. From past experience with Sero, this was a look of 'doubt'. "It was Izuku's idea."

"Oh well then." Sero relaxed. "Don't mind me, carry on."

"Moonbeam," Shouto said, catching Aoyama's eye. "Prism. Star flake. I need your help to come up with a plan." Aoyama giggled behind his hand.

"I have an absolutely sparkling idea~! But. You're not going to like it~!" Aoyama said with a challenging gleam in his eye. Shouto leaned forward and captured Aoyama's hand with his own. Sero coughed and looked away.

"Sugar plum, every single sentence that leaves your lips is a gem. I thought I knew wealth, but with you by my side I am a king. Please." Shouto could not tell if there were more sparkles in Aoyama's eye or if he was crying. Memorizing these phrases Ochako had given him was paying off. (Sero definitely had tears in his eyes)

"Oh darling~! Then I will tell you, even if it will break your heart. I can deny you nothing~!" Aoyama brought Shouto's hand to his cheek and gazed up through his lashes. "You should go to Bakuta, burst through the gates and demand to see...~!" Aoyama dropped his voice to a whisper "...Balloon Time, so you can arrest the villain."

Shouto hated it. A delicately embroidered handkerchief was dropped onto the table before Shouto's forehead could make contact with the bare surface. A hand patted his head in consolation.

"I hate him," Shouto whispered to the table.

"I know honey, I know."

"He always gets released as soon as he's arrested."

"You haven't seen him for a couple days, non? Also, the point is only to have a reason to look~!"

"... it's so *normal* ," Sero said. Shouto stiffened.

"He's right," Shouto said. He peeked up at Aoyama, who was still serenely smiling at him. "It's hardly a spectacle at all. Sparkle-pie."

"It's a hospital, mon cher, even you can't get away with taking the spotlight without hero work to back it up."

"We're using the distraction for heroic reasons. Dandy-bear."

"None that you would ever be able to admit to a commission representative. You need a cover. Besides~! You are not likely to find him there at all. Il est parfait~!"

"If I speak his name three times-"

"Darling, he's not a ghost."

"Yet."

Aoyama giggled and tapped Shouto's head to get him to look up.

"But that is not all. We do not merely throw on rags and call ourselves ready for the day~! Non~! At the center of every pearl is a tiny piece of common sand. We only need to add the glamour~!"

"Do you want pearls, honey-muffin?" Shouto would buy out a jewelry store.

"I prefer diamonds~!"

Today was not going as planned.

Currently, Shouta was pinned under Kaori, the psych nurse. She was one of the kindest people he had ever met. She was also built like All Might. Her main role seemed to be tackling violent patients into submission, but she was cheerful about it.

"I thought you were off with a sprained ankle," Shouta wheezed.

"Perks of working in health care," Kaori said, firming her hold as another nurse presumably prepared to jab him with a tranquilizer.

"This isn't... this isn't necessary. You got me, ok? I'm not going to hurt anyone," Shouta said.

"You just punched a nurse," Kaori said with a chuckle.

"He's not a nurse!" Shouta yelled. "And I didn't punch him." Technically.

"I'd believe you more if you weren't trying to punch me right now," she said.

"Sorry." Shouta tried to relax his limbs. He was still very much stuck in the 'fight' response.

"Tell you what," Kaori hummed. "I'll give you thirty seconds to relax. If you can do that we won't have to use the tranquilizer. Ok?"

Shouta nodded and took a deep breath. For all her bulk Kaori never actually tried to crush anyone. Calm. Calm. Just take a moment to breathe right now and look innocent. He would get another crack at escaping as long as they didn't knock him out. Shouta was innocent. *Shouta was innocent like baby lamb.*

There was a sudden pain in his flank.

" *Taki, what the actual fuck* !" Kaori yelled.

"He's violent! I'm not gonna look after him sober if he's already taken a swing at Yugo," Taki said.

Yeah well fuck you too, Taki.

And, *swing?* It was a solid *hit* . Shouta would be more pleased if he couldn't feel the weakness in his limbs as the drug took effect. Kaori was loosening her hold, bringing him up into a sitting position. Shouta's head lolled groggily to her shoulder. She took his pulse with a delicate hand on his wrist.

"Hey, hey," she said soothingly. There was a slight breeze past his face. Was she waving her hand in front of it? "Sorry about that, Mr Wazai. Hey, you seem to be having trouble tracking my hand?"

Ah yes. Shouta was having trouble keeping track of anything as he couldn't see. That was fun to discover this morning. Shouta shook his head and gave a groan.

"It's happening again? Have you not talked to the doctor about it? Losing vision intermittently like this is very concerning."

Yeah it was, but not medically.

Kaori lifted him up gently and presumably towards his room. He really hoped she wasn't going to leave him alone with Taki. Or Yugo. The only two people who weren't actually nurses in this damn hospital and Shouta had them all to himself. Shouta weakly tried to grab her wrist as she set him down on the bed.

"You know this isn't in my rotation, Mr. Wazai," Kaori said.

Please.

Shouta still did not possess telepathy despite all his practice. Gently Kaori removed his hand and made sure he was settled comfortably on the bed.

"You'll only be out for an hour or so. You'll be back to badgering the staff in no time, Taki is on duty. Just... please don't punch anyone?" Koari said. She left quietly.

Shouta drifted.

He had been confused when he had woken up blind that morning. His captor had been easing up on that particular hurdle as he became more convinced of Shouta's complacency. The confusion had been quickly allayed when he had a chance to catch the news.

Deku and Nedzu . And Izuku was *blind,* of all things. Shouta was sure it was no coincidence.

This was exactly the kind of thing he had been waiting for. It was time to get out. Unfortunately his first attempt had landed him here. He mentally gave himself one point for giving Yugo a headache, but it was still a failing grade. It would take several hours for the drug to leave his system enough for him to make another attempt.

The blindness didn't help.

Neither did the shackles Yugo stopped by to attach. Seriously, how did people not pick up on these guys not being hospital staff?

(*Wrong question* , an echo of his captor's voice. *How about; what happens to the people who find out?*)

Just. Just hold on, Nedzu. Shouta would get him back to normal and then he would attend every staff meeting. (That's a lie! said a voice in Shouta's head that sounded an awful lot like the tiny principal). Shouta needed to get to him. To them. He needed to fix things.

After these past two years Shouta had a lot to atone for. Every quirk he locked away was another red mark on his ledger. So many kids... Every time it was 'his choice'; remove the quirk or the man would remove Nedzu. He felt a long way from the man he once thought he was. It always felt like he was missing something obvious. Like there was some third option he was missing. If he was just smart enough to figure it out...

Hizashi wouldn't have given up. (At least he had gotten Eri out of the country)

Izuku would have torn himself to pieces before becoming complicit.

Nedzu would have known what to do.

Shouta hated the tranquilizer. It never actually knocked him out completely, just made it impossible to do anything but think. And then only in useless dream logic. Dream-logic-Nedzu was currently explaining exactly what he had missed, but he was doing so using a metaphor involving dogs and carousels. Shouta couldn't understand.

As Shouta was starting to feel a little more lucid the door softly clicked open. He tried to grumble something combative but his voice wasn't cooperating yet. The stranger's breath caught in their throat. Shouta wanted to open his eyes (but they were already open).

A hand tapped his shoulder, a voice mumbled a few words. It was not Yugo. It was not Taki. It was... Shouta just needed to open his eyes to see...

Strong arms lifted him from the bed and placed him in a chair. A sharp curse as they came across the bindings on his ankles (hobbled like a horse). A blanket was placed in his lap. Around his shoulders. His head was pushed back against a rest. As they started to move Shouta felt quite sick, like he was sliding along the roiling sea.

It was only when a sudden warmth hit his face (sunlight without the light) and the smell of flowers replaced the antiseptic that he could start making out words in the comforting rumble of his companion.

"...it's ok Sensei, we're just coming to the parking lot now. No one has seen us. No, don't look at the sun, close your eyes. Here it's going to get a little bumpy. I have so much to tell you but I haven't even had a cup of coffee yet so anything I say is probably not going to make a lot of sense..."

Ah. *It had taken him long enough.*

"If this were an exam you would have timed out," Shouta said. The voice paused.

"Are you trying to fail me during the rescue!?"

In the end, Shouto did end up finding Balloon Time. *His luck was abysmal* . Bursting through the hospital doors with sequence costumes and an intimidating dance routine ended rather

anticlimactically when the receptionist paled and paged the hospital director. As far as distractions went, shutting down a hospital because you were right about the reasons you made up to raid the place was... effective.

It turned out the hospital had been quietly treating and releasing certain villains back out onto the street for a while now. Which wasn't, to be sure, very different from the police station. The hero industry ran on flashy villains without any real ambition to throw their quirk around for thrills.

No one said this, of course, but Shouto had listened to enough of Izuku's rants to know the lay of the land. The people who really got the shit end of the justice stick were the people who negatively affected the bottom line. The people with no 'net worth'. These were the people who society failed, and the people that the vigilante network specialized in. A lot of destructive crime could be prevented by just making sure the people who fell through the cracks had some sort of support.

Who knew.

It also made for an excellent network of people willing to cover for the less than legal activities of Shouto's hobby. Izuku said this is often how organized crime worked, when asked hypothetically. Shouto had organized an ethics committee after that. The ethics committee was just Kouda and a parliament of quirked ravens. It was more effective than the hero commission.

Balloon Time was in a private room. Shouto gave him a bouquet of white balloons. Balloon Time had to be restrained and sedated. The hero commission agent dogging his heels was trying to dissuade Shouto from pursuing justice.

"What are you even trying to bring him in for," said the man. "Taking up a hospital bed? He is injured, he needs medical attention."

"How about we charge him for destruction of property, aggravated assault, and terrorism?" Shouto said coolly. "Like he was arrested for two days ago." Balloon Time started laughing sleepily.

"He was released," said the agent, not meeting Shouto's eyes.

"He shouldn't have been."

Balloon Time, for once in his life, was talking quietly to himself. Normally Shouto would take this for the blessing it was, except that he caught the word 'Deku' a few times.

"What is he saying?" Shouto held up a hand to stall the agent's platitudes and moved closer to the giant strapped to the hospital bed.

"... beat that bastard good, smashed him into paste, some pro-hero, really lived up to his name, 'Deku'," Balloon Time rambled. Shouto felt the hairs on his neck rise. He gripped Balloon Time's face to get him to focus, tapping his cheek to get him to open his eyes.

"Hey, hey, you clown, what are you talking about? Why are you talking about Deku?"

"'M not a clown, you fucker," Balloon Time said. His breath was terrible. He tried to pry Shouto's hands off his face. "'S cold, stop..."

"Scandal! This is assault, you need to-" The agent backed off as Shouto raised a thin wall of ice between them.

"Tell me about Deku."

"Ha ha, I got him good, I'm the greatest," Balloon Time laughed. He struggled for a moment to focus on Shouto's too close face. "Hey, he a frien' of yours? Ha ha ha, he had to be. 'called me 'bloon-time... I hate that name."

"I hate you too," Shouto said. "Hey, focus, what did you do?"

"'should say 'was' a friend of yours, ha ha," Balloon Time slurred.

"Was?" Shouto breathed.

"Yeah, was, fucker, Deku's dead!" Balloon time gathered enough energy for that last part to be very clear. Shouto stumbled back, wishing he was too numb to process that. The thin ice wall melted in a sudden heat and the hero commission agent was able to hear unobstructed;

"I fucking killed Deku! He's dead! Ha ha ha!" The sedative did nothing to dampen the man's glee.

"No. You can't have," Shouto said.

"Wanna bet? Crushed his face with my hand!"

Shouto got up in his face again. "When would you have even seen him?"

"Was taken care of business, you cold fucker. The little asshole wanted a fight, and I gave him one. Cage match at Mosu Eisu. Got the payout to prove it."

The agent's face paled. Shouto heard a high pitch ringing in his ears. He was only peripherally aware of ordering a police detail on the man's room. The hero commission agent nodded and went to flee. Shouto caught him by his sleeve.

"I guess we can add 'murder' to the list of charges," Shouto said, somehow staying on his feet. A large part of what got Shouto through the next thirty minutes was determined disbelief. There was no way Deku was dead. Shouto went through the motions of wrapping up the raid, booking the criminal (murderer, liar?), checking in with his strike team. Listened to the reports of other serial troublemakers found.

Text after text, call after call to Tsu.

No answer.

Balloon Time was an oaf. He was powerful, yes, but he was a loner. Tsu had been with Izuku and Nedzu. Someone had landed Balloon Time in the hospital, indicating that someone had managed to hurt him enough to be admitted. There was more to this story. Shouto had never taken to heart anything Balloon Time had said before, so why start now? Until he heard from one of those three personally he wouldn't jump to any conclusions.

(*He had told them Mosu Eisu was dangerous.*)

Aoyama took over trying to contact Tsu when Shouto had to debrief with Hagakure. Izuku was right, they were used to shoving everything down deep to work. And there was work to be done. He took a deep breath, thankful for once that his expression rarely gave anything away. It was useful for surprises like this. Behind an ambulance by emergency, Hagakure met him with a cleaning cart.

"I couldn't find him," Hagakure said quietly. Shouto knew it was a possibility. His stomach still hurt. Nothing was going right today.

"We knew..." Shouto cleared his throat. "We knew it was a long shot. Did you find any trace of him at all?"

Thanks to the cap Hagakure had picked up somewhere he could tell she shook her head. "But it wasn't a total bust. I found something else. Or someones."

She lifted the blanket along the side of the cart. Crammed in were five various animal children. They were so cute Shouto reflexively looked for trip wires. The children stared back at him solemnly. Shouto scanned them for injuries.

"Are you hurt?" He crouched down and offered a hand. "It's alright, we're going to..." 'take care of you' is the standard line, but it was also the most common propaganda directed at quirked animals. It felt false at best and threatening at worst. "We want to help you," he said instead.

(Focus on what you can control.)

Somewhere else, a man stood shaking in fury (and maybe a little fear). His hands hurt where they had impacted against the solid wooden desk. It grounded him a little. He slammed them down a second time, making the slight figure across from him jump. The desk was solid enough that none of the office supplies rolled away.

They were in a large office. There was a window behind the man that went floor to ceiling. It gave a beautiful view of the city when the curtains weren't closed. The rest of the room was covered in hundreds of screens mounted along the walls, the ceiling, the floor. In the center of all that was a stool where a thin teenager sat, hands gripping the stool like an anchor. The man met the boy's eyes and did his level best to let the tension bleed out of his body.

The boy was terrified.

"You know I'm not going to hurt you," the man said. They boy flinched, but perhaps it was meant to be a nod.

"I know," the boy said quietly.

"I'm not *like* them. You're safe," the man said.

"I know."

"I am not angry with you."

Silence.

The man sighed. It had been almost eight years, but the boy was still as quiet and fearful as the day he'd pulled him out of the rain. They had come so far together, but still he had to be careful not to shake that delicate foundation of trust.

He needed the boy, after all.

Almost as much as the boy needed him.

The man took a slow breath in. Reminded himself of his purpose. Reminded himself of all they had

already accomplished. It was the privilege of time to know that the difficult could be overcome. He had overcome so much. He had found a path in the dark before. He could find it again. He couldn't expect the child to know better than the man.

He just needed to ask the right questions.

The man glared at the darkened screens; they glowed with power but only displayed black. It had been a long time since they all went dark. The boy avoided looking at them. That was ok, he didn't need to look. Just sit there and listen. The man would take care of the heavy lifting.

"We knew it was going to get a little difficult this year," the man forced a chuckle. The boy's shoulders relaxed a little. "I just asked the wrong question. How about we take a little break, go get a snack? I'll have a chat with a couple people, see if I can't shed some light on the situation. We'll come back with clear heads, yeah?"

The boy nodded, but still wouldn't meet his eyes.

"How about we go try that new dessert place down the street?" the man asked, smiling fondly. As expected, the boy's head came up and his eyes were wide. The smile was a little tremulous, but it was there.

"Can I... do you think they have mochi?" he asked softly.

"If not, we'll keep looking until we find some. Come on, get your jacket. It's still a little chilly out."

Chapter End Notes

Shouto: watches a soap opera
Yuga: is a soap opera.

This is the last we'll see of Balloon Time (ah, who am I kidding, he'll probably show up again just for funsies.)

Of Hospitals and Hardware stores

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nedzu was only able to breathe properly after Asui had finished engaging all the locks and securities in the little safe house. Midoriya had been gently placed on a low couch in the living room. Unlike the other locations he'd seen of Todoroki's network, this was actually a livable apartment.

Except for the lack of phone service. (it was hard to breath again)

"It's a security measure," Asui had told him as he'd tried to connect the cell phone to anything. "We need to take care of Izuku first."

"'M fine," Midoriya said. He tried to sit up and overcompensated, falling onto his other side.

"You are not fine," she said, swallowing with a heavy click. "You are one big bruise," she muttered under her breath.

Midoriya was in rough shape. He'd managed to stay lucid the whole way there, but his breathing had an echoing wheeze to it like his lungs were working a couple seconds behind each breath. His eyes were useless for identifying a concussion, but there was still concerning bruising around them. Asui wrestled him out of his shirt and was able to determine he had no broken bones, but it seemed like he had sprained his ankle and had a great deal of bruising on his torso. Nedzu helped hold ice to his head as Izuku pulled a blanket around himself, shivering.

"He needs medical attention."

"He can't go to a hospital."

"He needs an actual doctor."

"We can't risk it."

Frogs, in general, are not particularly intimidating creatures. They do not tend to express themselves emotionally, they just *do what needs doing* . There is no social contract with a frog and Asui does not feel any discomfort from staring. She leans into this alien coldness to great effect and Nedzu cannot look away.

"We can't risk it?" Asui's voice is no more dangerous than it usually is, but there's an intensity to her eyes. She doesn't blink. "You just risked our lives for a couple sentences. I would think taking a chance on a medical professional is worth the life of my *friend* ."

"It was necessary," Nedzu said.

"Tsu I'm ok!" Midoriya said. "It's no worse than usual."

"Izu, you're usual is pretty bad. You also 'usually' go to the hospital," Asui said.

"Yeah well the last time I went to the hospital I came out blind."

"You would have come out a lot worse without the doctor's help," Asui said.

"Tsu, I didn't go in there with an eye or head injury. There is no innocent reason for me to have been left blind."

"I don't understand," Asui said.

"Shouto didn't fill you in?"

"No, you know what he's like on the phone. I barely figured out the message in time to meet with you."

Midoriya sunk into the couch. Tsu finally started unpacking the first aid kit. Nedzu hopped down as soon as Midoriya had secured the ice. If they were going to convince Asui of their ability to look after him they would need to actually start treating him.

"Really, I'm fine, nothing's broken," Midoriya grumbled. Asui patted him on the shoulder roughly and he flinched.

"Yes, absolutely fine," she said with rare sarcasm. "You're going to end up with hypothermia if we ice all your bruises at once."

Nedzu left her to her lecture as he started binding Midoriya's ankle. It had already swollen significantly.

"You can't keep doing this, Izu. It's going to kill you," Asui said.

"Where is this coming from, Tsu? You've never been precious about me being a hero before, what happened? I thought you believed in me," Midoriya asked quietly.

"I *believed* you knew how to pace yourself, kero, to take on what you could actually handle. Until your retirement you never got so hurt you couldn't bounce back. It turns out you've just been lucky."

Midoriya chuckled without humor. "Playing it safe was never an option for me. A quirkless hero standing on the sidelines? It's what everyone expected. I am not here to make anyone *comfortable* , Tsu. I've had to fight ten times as hard for anything I've ever gotten, I can't hold back. Being quirkless alone is enough to have the commission try to retire me."

"If we listened to everyone who told us what we 'can't' do, Ms Asui, we would never have left the cage," Nedzu said. Asui blinked.

"That isn't what I've been trying to say, kero," Asui said. "I never meant to doubt your competency. Either of you."

"Then what are you saying?" Midoriya asked.

"Heroics is a short term career, kero, the goal is not to make it a life-time one," Asui said, gently applying the analgesic to his torso. "I am not foolish enough to think that I will always be able to continue. Injuries do not need to be major to be career ending, and age isn't kind to reflexes. Nedzu had a secondary career in education. Before... before mutations became so much of a problem, I had plans to go into marine biology. Things are different now, but I still never expected to be a hero my whole life."

"Tsu, I had no idea. At UA-"

"At UA we were children. Being a hero is hard for everyone, you need to give it your all, kero."

"Being a hero is everything to me," Midoriya said softly.

"But it isn't *all* there is to you, kero. You're a whole person, not just your job. What were you planning to do after you retired? You... thought you were going to retire, didn't you?"

"Well, it felt kinda like planning to win the lottery? I mean, it would be nice and all, but there's not really a point to having an actual plan unless it happens, you know?"

"Congratulations, you just won the lottery," Asui said.

"It's not like that! This is just a setback," Midoriya said.

"You're blind, kero."

"We're in the middle of something huge, Tsu. The person who toppled Nedzu is still out there, and I'm not giving up just because they've made it a little harder for me."

"A little harder..? When is it going to be more than just a 'setback'?" Asui yelled. Midoriya flinched at the volume but didn't stop frowning. "How much do you have to lose, *to give* , before you finally decide it's enough? What's left for *Izuku* when this is over?"

"My friends and family," Midoriya said. "All the people I've saved. All the people who they save, and all the people who are going to do great things because I was able to go just a little longer and keep them safe."

Midoriya stopped to catch his breath. Asui was tearing up, arms hugging her middle. Nedzu felt distinctly out of place. He had never had plans beyond entrenching himself so thoroughly in world he could not be removed from it. Beyond that fear-based motivation, he had only sought to make it easier for others like him to make their way in the world. Asui's concerns felt alien to him. Had he encouraged the hero to the destruction of the person underneath?

"You really are a true hero, Izuku," Asui said in a watery voice. "But you are also my friend, and I am so, so scared for the day I lose you."

"Tsu..."

"No," she said, wiping her eyes. "I need you to know that there are people who want you around for more than what you can do for them. And I know you can't promise me you won't get hurt, but I want you to promise me that you'll make a plan for the future."

"I had no idea you felt this way, Tsu. I'm sorry for worrying you, and I really can't go to a hospital right now, but I'm going to do my best to get out of this intact. We have Nedzu back. We can finally start making a difference again, instead of just surviving in the shadows."

Nedzu noted how handily Midoriya avoided making any promises. That was probably something he should follow up on. Further discussion was halted as Midoriya suddenly lurched forward.

"Bathroom, I need," he heaved. Asui had him lifted and off the couch before anything could come up. Nedzu gathered up a cup of water and the blanket before following. Midoriya knelt in front of the toilet with Asui a steady presence beside him. Nedzu set the cup by his knee.

"A concussion is likely," Nedzu said softly. Asui stared at him blankly, large hands steady on Midoriya's shaking frame. "There's water at your knee." Nedzu sat down on the tiled floor a little ways away.

"He needs a doctor," Asui said.

"It's not that bad, I'm just a little dizzy," Midoriya told the toilet. His hands had a white knuckle grip on the bowl of the toilet.

"Is there anyone you could bring here, someone we can trust?" Nedzu asked Asui. She looked at him.

"I think there might be someone I can try," she said after a minute. Nedu resisted the urge to squirm.

"Then perhaps you should-"

"I would need to go get them," Asui interrupted. She made no move to leave Midoriya's side. Nedzu waited a half a minute and she still didn't move. He watched her watching him and came to an unpleasant realization.

"You don't trust me," he said.

"Tsu!" Midoriya hissed. Asui sighed.

"I trust you to do what you think is best."

"And that's not enough to keep Midoriya safe?"

"Evidently not, as we saw tonight," Asui said in a measured tone.

"Tsu that's not fair-"

"No, Izuku. He chose the plan that had the highest possible reward no matter the cost. You are a brilliant strategist, principal, but your win condition isn't the same as mine. I am concerned that if I leave you here alone you will leave Izu alone if you deem the risk worth it," Asui said.

"I will not leave Midoriya alone," Nedzu said.

"Oh? Not even to get cell signal?"

"It would be a liability if there were no way to contact the outside world from inside this safehouse," Nedzu said before he could stop himself. Asui stared.

"And if there weren't?" Asui said. Rhetoric wasn't going to get them anywhere. Nedzu said nothing.

"Tsu. If you are going to get help please go get it. We'll be fine," Midoriya said. He carefully felt around his knee for the water.

"Midoriya Izuku if you tell me you are fine one more time-" Asui started.

"No, Tsu. I'm safe with Nedzu. He's the first person that ever really believed in me, besides my mom. He knows what I can handle on my own," Midoriya said.

"Honestly I don't think you even know what you can handle on your own," Asui said. Midoriya's face crumpled into a frown. Asui always spoke her truth, unfortunately it sounded like every overprotective platitude Midoriya had been fed since he was four.

"I wasn't the first," Nedzu said before Midoriya could respond. They didn't need an argument.

They needed Asui to go find someone to help.

"What?" Midoriya asked.

"To believe in you. I wasn't the first."

"Who-"

"Asui, please go for help. I won't leave him alone with a concussion and time is of the essence. We don't have time to keep debating this." Nedzu said, moving closer to lay the blanket on Midoriya's back. Asui sighed and nodded.

"Alright. I'll go. You *stay* with him."

"I have no reason to be anywhere else."

"Not really the answer I wanted, but it will have to do for now. We will talk more when Izuku has been seen to." Asui was efficient in her departure and soon they were left alone. Nedzu patted Midoriya's back in a standard human comforting gesture as he rested his forehead on his arms. It was quiet for a while, Nedzu considering his next steps and Midoriya swallowing back the nausea.

"Who was the first? To believe in me, that is," Midoriya croaked out eventually. "I mean! You don't have to tell me, I just thought... sorry..." he said softly. Nedzu chuckled.

"Oh, that would be Aizawa."

Hitoshi stared at the rack of power tools. They seemed to have a ranking based on how bright the colors were and how dangerous the name sounded. Hitoshi was not sure if the 'Demon Maw' was a better brand than 'Razor Alligator', but there didn't seem to be a huge emphasis on safety ratings.

He was so out of his depth.

Beside him in a stolen wheelchair Aizawa glared impatiently. "Well?" He asked, like he was eager to let any of these monsters near his legs. Maybe it helped that he couldn't see the collection.

"There's a lot of options," Hitoshi stalled. Even now his hands were unsteady and he hadn't even picked one up yet. They looked like angry dogs.

"Just pick that one," Aizawa said, pointing at random. He was pointing at a display of measuring tapes.

"Well they say you should measure twice, cut once," Hitoshi said. Aizawa didn't laugh.

"How can it be so hard to pick out a hacksaw?" he asked.

Oh. Was that what they needed?

"Uh right... hacksaw..."

"How are you this uncomfortable in a hardware store? Were you not friends with Midoriya?"

"Uh well, Izu usually went alone?" Hitoshi had gone once with Izuku. After that he had a hard time setting foot into one without it feeling like an evidence locker for murder weapons. "Momo usually had us covered for anything specialized."

"Can I help you, sirs?" an old man called from the end of the aisle. He was wearing a vest with the logo of the store and watched them intently.

"Uh, hacksaws?" Hitoshi asked. The man raised an eyebrow, taking in Aizawa's hospital attire layered under many bundled blankets, the wheelchair, and Hitoshi's likely *rough* appearance. He then flicked his eyes at the many expensive power tools on the wall beside Hitoshi.

"What are you looking to cut?" the man asked instead, walking sedately down to stand by Aizawa's chair. Hitoshi fought the urge to implement his quirk. Even if the man was suspicious of them, he wasn't wasn't doing anything yet. Hitoshi wasn't keen to brainwash a civilian outside of an emergency.

"I need to cut some metal?" Hitoshi asked. Everything came out as a question when he was stressed. Aizawa glared in his direction. Hitoshi could *feel* the demerits, even though he was long out of school and had since worked as a colleague with the man.

"Well," the man said, rocking back on his heels. "If you're looking to cut something thin a hacksaw will do just fine, but a grinder would probably serve better for anything thick. 'Ripper' is a good brand, good value for *your money* ." The man gestured back at the terrifying display on the wall. Hitoshi frowned at it.

"Um, I've not used one before, so I'm not exactly sure what I'm looking for?"

The man moved towards the display, almost leaning over Aizawa in the chair. Aizawa rolled back out of the way but as he did so the blanket on his lap was pulled off from where it was pinched under the employee's foot. The man watched with a smug expression as Aizawa lost layers of concealing blanket. Aizawa made a grab for the blanket but it was caught up by the old man before he could make contact.

"Ah hah!.... ah?" he said, scouring the fallen blanket for something when he caught sight of the heavy manacles on Aizawa's ankles. *Shiiiiit.*

There was an awkward heavy pause.

"This isn't what it looks like," Hitoshi said. Aizawa facepalmed.

"Really? Cause it looks like you've just busted out of a medieval prison," the man said, staring at the heavy metal cuffs. "Who are you guys?"

"Which answer keeps you from calling the cops?" Hitoshi asked. *Trick question, any answer will do.*

The man let out a strangled laugh. "You know what? I don't even care. You want help getting those off?"

Hitoshi dropped the thread of connection in shock. "You want to... help us?"

"Sure, why not? Save me from having to submit a theft report," the man said. He dropped the blanket back onto Aizawa's lap.

"I have money! We were going *to buy* it," Hitoshi protested.

"Sure kid," the old man said.

"Why are you doing this?" Aizawa asked. "Just a minute ago you were trying to bust us for shoplifting, now you're going to come at us with power tools?"

The old man heaved a sigh. "I can't think of any legitimate reason for that kind of hardware, and quite a few not. Not everyone is safe going through the legal channels, I get it, I do. Someone... someone once helped my grandson when he needed it. It's only fair that I do my part."

"I'm a hero," Hitoshi said, because what the fuck Hitoshi. The old man gave him a look. "Probably."

"God, kid," Aizawa muttered under his breath. *Don't need judgment right now, Sensei.* So he was struggling with socializing. Living in the vents of an office building for a month left you a little rusty.

The old man chuckled. "Sure kid. Let's get you sorted in the back."

- Eight years Ago -

It was not uncommon for Aizawa to come for a meeting at the beginning of the school year. Nedzu usually kept his schedule light for that purpose. Adjusting a whole new batch of first years into the way UA operated required a touch of finesse (and near obsessive observation).

Nedzu had just placed the steaming mugs of tea in place as Aizawa walked in, a surprisingly thin folder in his hand (and only one). Nedzu took it from him but did not open it. Instead he warmed his paws on his cup and observed the man across from him.

Aizawa did not look at Nedzu (as was typical. Unlike most humans, Aizawa knew his gaze was a threat). But he also did not stare at the file. Nor did he take the tea. Instead he was looking out the window. He did not fidget, he did not wonder where to place his hands. He was not rigid or full of spiteful energy. He did not have a plan in mind for how this conversation would go, nor what action he wanted from it.

He was here for honest advice.

Interesting.

Nedzu flipped open the file. *Very interesting.*

Humans, Nedzu had found, were tricky creatures. Even when they had no intention of lying to you there were social contracts and customs to be worked around. Communication with them was complex. In his early years, Nedzu had obsessively observed them in order to be able to predict them. It had been survival (it still was). There were a million factors that could affect even the most predictable outcomes. He preferred being in a position to control his environment.

In this situation, even as open as Aizawa's body language was, Nedzu knew the quickest way to get to the heart of the matter was to say something objectively wrong. Humans were the most thorough when they felt they had to explain why you were incorrect. It was an opening that encouraged full disclosure and often short circuited the polite platitudes.

Besides, putting people on defense was his favorite guilty pleasure.

"You already want to expel him?" Nedzu asked. Aizawa jerked in his seat.

"What? No. *Do not expel him."*

Oh, Aizawa was *invested* . That was neat.

Aizawa glanced at Nedzu's 'polite' smile and dropped his face into his hands with a groan. "The kid scares me," he said. Nedzu twitched his nose.

"Midoriya Izuku. Quirkless. Average practical score as far as successful candidates go. In his picture it looks like he is crying," Nedzu said. "Where do the facts become terrifying?"

"In his first practical assignment he broke five bones in two limbs. He did not tap out. He completed it successfully, inventively, and two of the other kids observing the exercise fainted before he did. When I went to debrief him he apologized for being a burden on the system and begged for an opportunity to prove himself so that I would not expel him. While I tried to come up with an appropriate reply to... all that... he let slip that he had enough evidence for a lawsuit against the school for a discrimination case should we attempt expulsion.

"He cried when he realized he had threatened the school *out loud* , but provided proof of his evidence when asked. It was ample. Were our intentions to single him out for his quirklessness, our positions would be at risk." Aizawa smiled as he said this. Unlike most humans who winced at Nedzu's grin, Aizawa admired it enough to mimic it.

"He sounds dangerous," said Nedzu, smiling back.

"He's the student you've been waiting for."

"So why are you bringing him to my attention so early? Usually the staff collude to hide such promising young minds from me until they can be tempered through the UA curriculum," Nedzu said. UA was big on teaching autonomy and helping students thicken their skin and establish support networks. Nedzu's UA produced graduates with a shield against the commercial machine that was modern heroics.

"Because he doesn't trust anybody. He needs someone with authority to be firmly on his side so that he has the freedom to make mistakes and push back. Because he needs to succeed as the first quirkless hero not just for himself but for the next batch of kids. Because he's always going to be punching up," Aizawa said.

"And what is it that you want me to do?"

"I don't know, talk to him. Help him. *Make sure he isn't hiding any injuries,* " Aizawa said. "I need to be able to push him to his limits and beyond, he needs to know someone with authority will override me if I go too far. He needs to be secure that I can't expel him without your approval. He needs to know that he is allowed to fail, that we will still be there to help him get right back up."

The next day Midoriya came to see him after school. He was shivering with adrenaline. He kept his eyes down, but his shoulders squared. He thanked Nedzu kindly for the tea and took a seat on

the couch opposite the principal. Nedzu settled himself with his own cup.

It had taken him a long time to realize that there were whole different books on human expression depending entirely on the situation they were in. They learned to wear these masks innately, so much so that many of them forgot they wore masks at all. It had confused Nedzu considerably to find that almost none of the behaviors he had painstakingly memorized from the doctors and lab assistants actually translated to the real world. That none of the behaviors Nedzu had learned to exhibit out of necessity (meekness, fear, complacency) were expected in the regular every day routine of the human world.

Nedzu had to stop himself from advising Midoriya to drop the defiance from his shoulders, to hide the sneaking glances better, to play up the quiet obedience. He did not want to train this student to survive on the lowest rung.

He wanted to teach him to fight. To win.

Nedzu was not human. Aizawa knew that. He would not be able to mentor and guide the boy through society in any human way. He would only be able to give him what he himself had wanted at this stage. Leverage.

"A-a-are you going to e-e-xpel me?" Midoriya asked.

"And what would you do if I were?" Nedzu asked. Midoriya let out a breath like he'd been kicked. The gathered tears fell in angry streaks, but he met Nedzu's eyes then. Green flashed and Nedzu felt his hackles rise. He bit back his grin.

"I-I-I am not j-j-just going to let you do that. I-I-I deserve to be here, I p-p-passed the exams. M-m-my performance is objectively b-b-better than half the current class. I have enough e-e-evidence to-"

"And what would you do with the evidence? You would be going against UA. How are you going to find someone to take a discrimination case against such a prestigious institution?" Perhaps Midoriya was going to need someone else when *Nedzu* went too far. Midoriya set down his tea carefully and started rummaging through his backpack. He pulled a business card out of a tattered notebook and slid it across the table to Nedzu with shaking fingers.

Oh, those were not bottom feeders.

"And I assume you've compiled evidence?" Nedzu asked, no longer suppressing the grin. Midoriya looked taken aback.

"I s-s-showed Mr Aizawa some of it," Midoriya said.

Some? And Aizawa had said 'ample'.

Nedzu started cackling. Midoriya shrank back.

"Oh no, I am so sorry, I... *I just threatened the Principal of UA, what the hell were you thinking Izuku* , there was no way this was ever going to work and now he's laughing what do I do this is so bad, they let you in their school *a quirkless student* , maybe he wasn't even going to expel you before but now..." Midoriya muttered quietly. He carefully closed up the notebook and pulled the backpack in front of him as a shield. His face was turning a strong pink. Nedzu was having trouble breathing.

"I... I... ah," Nedzu tried. He really needed to calm down. "I take it you've had trouble with schools

before, young Midoriya?"

Head still hidden Midoriya nodded.

"I'm going to be frank with you, Midoriya. We have no intention of expelling you. Yesterday Aizawa came to me and asked me to get involved personally. He believes you need assurance that your place here is solid. *We want you here, Midoriya* . So you and I are going to work together to find tools and measures that give you a feeling of security in your continuing education here.

"This lawsuit you were ready to put together seems like a solid start! As practice, I think we should start by building a case against one of your previous schools, whichever one you feel most strongly about. It will give you experience and confidence to build a case against UA, should you need it. I will guide you every step of the way so that you can see how a properly presented case can achieve success!"

"Are you... teaching me to blackmail a school?" Midoriya whispered.

"It isn't blackmail if you skip the extortion!”

Chapter End Notes

Aizawa: I asked you to help him.
Nedzue: And I did!
Aizawa: You gave him leverage to destroy us.
Nedzu: Look at his smile!

Java

Chapter Summary

Izuku and Nedzu have a chat!

Shouta and Hitoshi drink coffee!

Nefarious plans are hatched!

Chapter Notes

Do I know where this is going?

Yes.

Is it going to be good? WHO KNOWS? Stick around and find out ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku was exhausted. His ankle hurt, his torso hurt, his joints were stiff and he had been sitting on the bathroom floor for hours (37 minutes according to Nedzu, but who's counting.) Nedzu has been cautiously plying him with water, ice and blankets while sharing anecdotes from before his entry to UA. It was like he was reading from a script.

Nedzu liked to talk, that was true, but he rarely took the comfort of his audience into consideration. All these stories were easy to follow with actual beginnings, middles and ends, so unlike his usual endurance testing lectures. Like clockwork he would provide well telegraphed physical comfort every time Izuku started to shiver.

It grated on his nerves.

"Do you remember," Izuku started, interrupting the lead into the next story about a student with a microwave quirk, "when you used to grade me on my rants?"

Nedzu paused. He was likely scanning Izuku's face for cues. He was meticulous with his approach to human communication. It had taken Izuku a long time to figure out that Nedzu was screening his own reactions to things as much as he was trying to interpret the data. Izuku still wasn't sure where the mask ended and the person began, but this consideration was too much of the former.

"I used to call you up to my office," Nedzu said.

"You'd give me stickers," Izuku said.

"You were always easy to please."

"They were *limited edition,"* Izuku said, affronted. He still had them, somewhere. He really hoped his apartment wasn't ruined. "It took me a while to realize you had bugged my backpack."

"And tie," Nedzu said.

"What! How did I miss...? *Anyway* it was a gross violation of privacy."

"It never seemed to bother you," Nedzu said.

"I documented it. Read up on surveillance law. Researched precedent, my rights as a student, my available options. In the end I decided to leave it. Do you know why?"

"You wanted more stickers?"

"Well... maybe partly. But. You would have known all that. How it would be viewed, should there be a court case," Izuku chuckled and Nedzu joined in. *Old joke* . "But you persisted. Selfishly, you persisted."

"Would you like an apology?" Nedzu asked. Izuku started to shake his head before he remembered why that might be a bad idea.

"No. That's not where I'm going with this. It's just that... you went out of your moral and legal way to listen to me. And I know it wasn't part of some secret extra credit course, you graded me with stickers. You just, selfishly, *wanted to hear what I had to say."*

"Oh," said Nedzu.

"Back then... back then no one really listened to me. I had to speak ten times louder just to be heard, and then get scolded for 'getting upset'. Those stickers... they were validating. Physical proof that *someone* wanted to listen to me as I was. You graded me on style, but never tried to edit the content. It was. It meant a lot."

Nedzu said nothing for a time. Izuku took a drink of cool water, shifting around to try and ease the ache in his ankle. Oh the floor was cold, which was both relieving and awful.

"Anyway. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I get it. I know you're not human, and I may not ever really understand, but I get it. And the things I've always admired most about you, the things I benefited the most, are the things that don't fit into human custom. I don't need or want some human version of compassion from you, I just want..."

"Me to be honest," Nedzu said.

"Well... yeah? I mean, I already trust you more than Tsu thinks I should, but I know... I know where you're trying to get to, and it's the same place I want to be too. I have my human support network, even if it seems pretty all over the place. I can get compassion when I need it. But you're the only one that takes me at face value without trying to manage me. I think... I think that's what I want."

"Not to be managed?"

"Not... I mean. You helped me when I needed it by listening to what I had to say as myself. Without bringing in what I should be doing, or saying, or acting. I'd like to be able to do that for you. I can listen, and you don't need to manage my feelings. I can handle that."

There was a thud from Nedzu's direction. Had Izuku said something wrong? Oh no, what if...

"I would have stopped with the bugs, if you'd asked me to," Nedzu said.

"No you wouldn't, you would just have stopped telling me about it."

"Point," Nedzu said.

"Despite what everyone thinks, I am capable of speaking up if I'm having trouble with something, but I'd rather just be useful than catered to, you know?"

"Asui had a point about you being worth more than your use to others," Nedzu said.

"I think I know that, on some level. Right now though... I really need to be useful," Izuku said quietly. Nedzu chittered his teeth and came closer, curling up into a ball next to Izuku's thigh.

"You always were my favorite student," he said. The nervous energy of the past half hour melted away. It felt like Nedzu meant to be there now, no longer dancing around appropriate social custom to appease the humans.

"So what's next?"

Before Nedzu could give a response the front door slammed open. Two footsteps, a couple of clanging thumps and the door slammed closed.

"TEN MILLION!" came a terrifying shout. *Oh no.*

Mei.

It is necessary, at times, to focus on the positives. Currently, Shouta has *a really good cup of coffee* . It was pleasantly warm in his hands. He was out of that damn hospital. He no longer had chains on his feet, and the old man at the hardware store had given him a change of clothes. He was sitting in the warm sun with his back to a wall and a very competent pro-hero sitting between him and any possible threat. It was the safest he'd felt in years.

This did nothing to mitigate the fact that this was probably the most awkward social interaction he had had in years. It did not help that Shouta had only practiced adversarial communication for two, and was struggling to come up with some response that was both positive and not sarcastic.

"...and so I really had a lot of time to think, you know? And I know we aren't in the habit of just... saying it or anything. I mean, I know the value of professional conduct and you've always done your best to welcome me as an equal, a colleague, even though you taught me in high school. But. I just want to say I'm *so happy* to see you again," Hitoshi said. Even without being able to see it Shouta could tell he was talking more to the table than his face. He straightened in his chair reflexively.

"And I have no idea what you've been through, but I really need to tell you how much everything you did for me meant. You are really important to me, and it was devastating when you disappeared. Oh god I can't believe you're actually here," Hitoshi sniffed. Oh... no... *say something nice* .

"This is... really good coffee," Shouta said. *There, honest AND positive.* Hitoshi sobbed. *Shit. Was he supposed to pat his head, or was that just children and cats?*

"Sorry, I'm sorry," the kid apologized. "I think I've been picking it up from Izu. I'm okay." A loud sniff and the rustle of a napkin. Shouta was actually kind of okay with the blindness right now. He took another sip of the heavenly brew.

"There's no reason to apologize," Shouta said.

"It took me two years to find you," Hitoshi hissed at him. *"Two years."*

"I am aware," Shouta said. "But you did find me."

"It felt like we were just spinning our wheels. Once you were gone everything seemed to just stop, we were completely unable to make any progress. So much for putting your teaching to practice," Hitoshi said.

"As flattering as that is, I'm not sure I would have done any better. He was ready for us," Shouta said. He hadn't done any better. Hadn't even been able to rescue himself. There was always *some* kind of bad luck that always showed up at the wrong time. That bad luck usually took the form of Yugo or Taki, but still. It was awfully convenient bad luck.

"He?" Hitoshi asked. Right, Hitoshi likely had no idea what was actually going on. This whole case was a nightmare of random facts stitched together with desperation. It hadn't been until he was firmly caught that he'd realized there had been someone driving it at all. The café around them was a fairly cozy affair, going by the acoustics, but Shouta would still have to be careful what he said out here in the open.

"There is a man," Shouta said. *Informative AND dramatic, full points.* "Who I am sure is entirely responsible for everything we've gone through the last five years."

"Including Nedzu?" Hitoshi whispered near inaudibly.

"Yes."

"Uh, I found him too," Hitoshi said. Shouta nearly dropped his mug.

"I thought he was with the problem child," Shouta said.

"Well, yeah, I set up a little paperwork shuffle. Conveniently, Izu was in the system to be set up with a service animal, so I just... switched some names."

"How... that..." Shouta took a breath. "It's hardly convenient at all. His blinding was deliberate."

"How do you know that?"

"Same reason I woke up blind before the news of Deku and a mouse hit the airwaves; it's an attempt to keep us out of the way. That's not the issue right now, though. *I need to get to them* ."

"What? He'll be safe with Izu, and he'll have Izu's back."

"Possibly only half of that is true."

"Why wouldn't we be able to trust Nedzu?" Hitoshi asked, not even a hint of doubt in his friend. Shouta would be more impressed if he hadn't worked with the duo for three years.

"I-" Shouta's voice cracked. *Shit, this was going to be hard to talk about.* "Don't you find it a little suspicious that he was in the position to be shuffled off as a service animal?"

"I'm suspicious of everything, Sensei, but I also know an opportunity when I see one. Did something... happen? to him?"

"Two years ago I was given a choice," Shouta said, instead of anything actually direct and helpful. *Come on Shouta, be logical* . Blunt is *okay* ; it's like a band aid, just rip it off. He put down the coffee and wiped his sweating hands off on his thighs. *Okay* . "Two years ago the enemy captured me. He took me to Nedzu. I was given a dose of trigger. I applied my quirk to him. Permanently."

"Shit," Hitoshi said quietly. Shouta just focused on breathing past the jittery nerves. The coffee was probably not helping. "Shit. I. I hate to ask this, but are you sure it's permanent?"

"Very sure. I was given ample time to test the theory," Shouta said quietly.

"So you've talked to Nedzu since?"

Shouta shook his head.

"What? Oh. Oh no..." They sat quietly for a few minutes (hours?) as Hitoshi absorbed the implications. Shouta drank the cooling coffee as penance (it was still delicious).

"We need to see Izu."

"I need to fix this," Shouta said. And he would. He'd been prepared with a secret dose of trigger behind his ear for a long time. It had taken him much longer than he expected to get out of the situation, but he had always been ready. All that was left was to find his old boss and...

"I may have miscalculated," Shouta said, numbness dropping through his core like ice.

"Not gonna lie, I'm a little lost here. Miscalculated what?"

"I'm blind. I. I can't use my quirk while I'm blind."

The man smiled down at the preview headline in satisfaction. ' *Exclusive Interview with 'My Name is Not Balloon Time', Details of Deku's Demise* '. Morbid, but effective. It was unfortunate that they had to resort to, well, murder, but there was more at stake than one sanctimonious retired hero. He'd given the meddling Deku ample warning, a safe way to bow out. It wasn't his fault if the hero hadn't taken it. Soon he would have the rat safely locked away to remain as useful leverage to retain his other asset. Surely with this progress the future would be *brighter* .

"This is excellent work," He said into the phone. "How you managed to get an interview with the killer himself before the news has even broken is phenomenal. How tight is this story? Are we going to have any... competition?"

" *Oh no no, we're not exaggerating when we say exclusive,"* the editor chuckled over the line. *"The man was pretty far gone on painkillers, and the commission was keen to keep him tucked away snug. They have Scandal breathing down their neck on this one, they can't afford any slips. Luckily for us that's hardly a speed bump for our journalist.* "

"Quite. The man deserves a bonus, don't you think?"

" *Don't you worry. Our boy isn't going anywhere. He knows what side his bread is buttered on,* "

the editor assured him. The man scanned the article with a slight smile. A well executed plan was always satisfying. His gaze caught on a little box sitting on the corner of the desk. Oh. Oh he had an idea. One success would lead quite neatly to the next, he was sure.

"Listen. What do you think of holding off on this one say, by a day?"

" *What? After this kind of hustle? I'd say that's insulting."*

"The story is tight though, isn't it? No one is going to beat us to the punch?"

"I mean, it's possible, but not likely. I think it's a damn shame to risk a lead like this one."

"I would consider it a personal favor," the man said.

"You're not wanting to scoop the story yourself, are you?"

"Hardly! No, it's just that there is some side business that would go a little easier for me if the news of Deku's passing was delayed by a day. Just something personal."

"You and your side business. Alright, boss. We'll hold off. If it were anyone else asking me, I'd just ignore the order and publish it anyway, damn the consequences. This is really prime stuff! It's your call though. If someone else breaks it before we do, you're on the hook for consoling our prize journalist."

"I'll take full responsibility. Thank you," the man said, ending the call.

The man picked up the box, tipping out a phone into his hand. It was covered in hero stickers lovingly applied. Charms of some of the current top pros clinked as he flipped it over and turned it on. His tech quirk specialist had done a lovely recovery job; full service included cracked security along with a perfect repair. It was probably in better condition than it had started out.

"I have an idea I'd like to run by you," the man called out to the teen absorbed in his phone. The kid was slumped in a nest of cushions on the far side of the room.

"Oh?" the kid asked, not looking up.

"There's one loose end we haven't addressed yet, that missing underground pro. He was known to be quite good friends with the late Deku," the man said, opening the menu to search through the contacts. Unfortunately, the ex-pro had taken the time to delete his texts some time before disintegrating his phone, so he had no history to go off of. He hadn't deleted his contacts, though, which was almost entirely comprised of pro-hero names (minus the one 'Mom' on the list).

"That's not a question," the kid said, tapping away on his phone. He reached out one foot and started turning the monitors on he could reach.

"I'm getting there. You don't like it when I ask you questions without context, remember?"

The kid grumbled, scooting himself along the floor to reach the next set of monitors.

"I am going to send this hero a text from Deku's phone. Luckily, we know that the late pro would have... difficulties... with the usual inputs. It would be believable for him to send a canned greeting."

The kid stopped, tilting his head back to meet his eyes.

"Don't do that, it's bad for your neck," the man scolded. The kid rolled his eyes, rolling a hand to

prompt him into actually asking a question. Man the kid was sassy today. He supposed he preferred it to the anxious flinching.

"Oh fine, What would happen if I were to send 'Hi, are we still on for tonight?' from this phone to the contact 'Caption'?" the man asked, picking the first suggested option. As soon as he had finished the question the kid slammed his eyes shut and threw his hands over his ears. The air around the boy started fizzing, static being picked up by the monitors around him.

Promising.

The man continued down the list.

The text quietly came in as he paid for their coffees and were leaving the café.

Hey, let's meet up!

Sent from Izuku's personal phone. Izu never texted him from his personal phone. Hitoshi chuckled.

"Well that's a trap," Hitoshi said.

"What?"

"Someone's got Izu's phone."

"What do they want?"

"They want us to fall into their trap."

"Obviously. What are we going to do about it?"

Hitoshi couldn't help the giddy delight that came from his mentor asking for *his* advice. A part of him was still that fifteen year old starving for validation. Of course it came with the weight of actually having advice worth listening to, but Hitoshi had an idea.

"Well, first we should get in contact with Izuku. I've been out of the loop for a while, so I'm not really sure about the lay of the land, or who is safe right now. I have an idea, but Izu is going to hate it."

Chapter End Notes

> I don't know how to write Aizawa without a fight scene. I am having way too much fun making up a villain.

Needless Needles

Chapter Summary

Mei does some medicine.

Ochako has a time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku held very still. Being helped by Mei was often very.... efficient, but often came at the cost of serving as a test subject. She had gotten better, over the years, of actually giving you instruction beyond 'hold this'. That didn't stop the consequences for failing to obey being limb threatening.

Nedzu had cleverly scuttled off as soon as Mei had arrived to go find a cell signal. Izuku was very envious.

"...and *this* cute little baby is *brand new* ! It's going to revolutionize field medicine. Don't move." Her voice was muffled by some tool or other. Icy clamps clipped into place on either side of his ankle and he really hoped he was going to have a foot after this. Cool hands smoothed some sort of gel onto his ankle. His head prickled from the uncomfortable... helmet?... she had thrown on his head shortly after their 'hello's. It felt like needles, but did a fair amount to distract from the throbbing headache.

In fact, he didn't seem to feel the headache much at all anymore.

"Mei I'd like to state for the record that I do not consent to amputation," Izuku said, carefully holding still. It was everything he could do to clamp down on his fight response.

"Oh nonsense, there's no record," said Mei. Something whirred to life and Izuku hoped it was just a fan. "Your heart rate is elevated, please try to relax."

Right. Deep breath.

"Tsu, if she starts cutting anything, tackle her," Izuku said. Tsu's hand tightened in his.

"I don't see any cutting tools, kero," Tsu said like the angel she was. That didn't actually mean he was *safe;* Mei's tools were not always self-explanatory.

"Oh quiet, I'm just having a look inside to see if anything is out of place," said Mei. There were some worrying clicks (mechanical) and Mei clucked at it. "Just sprained, I think. I'll have a brace worked out in a jiffy. Let's let the cooling gel do its job for a bit."

Suddenly there were hands on his face. Izuku held his breath as a thumb brushed under his right eye.

"When are you going to let me do something about your eyes, Izu?" Mei said from very close. Izuku scrunched his eyes shut.

"What do you mean?" He regretted asking immediately.

"Wouldn't you like to replace them with something functional?"

"Mei, it's very likely there's nothing wrong with my eyes. More likely it's a quirk effect, and who knows what that's even tied to. *No you can't cut into my brain* ."

"No one said it would have to *correct* your sight," Mei said.

"I like my eyes, Mei, I'd like to keep them." He'd like to avoid Mei having a reason to scoop them out. *Show no fear, Izuku, she can smell it.*

"Such valuable real estate," she hummed. "We could put cameras in there that could record evidence. And microphones. Laser vision is notoriously lacking in the vision department so we could even do something in that direction..."

Or image recognition software to identify who he was talking to, or give an early warning sign. Or remote viewing for someone to guide him...

No Izuku. *Stop Izuku* .

He took a deep breath.

"Mei, please. I'm kind of hoping that there's still a way to reverse it."

She stopped her list of (tempting) suggestions. "Alright, but it's always an option!" Mei was smiling, he was sure of it. "How's your head?"

"It's... fine actually?" Izuku was pleased to find it true. He felt much less nauseous but still uncomfortable. His cheeks were numbing where Mei gripped them like an over-enthusiastic aunt. Either she was pinching hard enough that he was losing feeling or the gel she'd used on his ankle had an analgesic component. "What is this helmet doing to my brain?"

Always a valid question when Mei was around.

Before she could answer he heard a key in the lock. Icy air rushed in as whoever it was entered the small apartment.

"Oh thank fuck," came a quiet voice.

"Shouto?" Izuku asked. The thud of someone sliding to the floor. "Is he okay?"

"Just stunned, kero," Tsu said.

"Am I ok?" Shouto asked with a weak chuckle. "Izuku we were told you were dead. Tsu just sent her location, no message."

"What?" Izuku asked. Tsu smacked her head into her hands (Izuku's hand included).

"Shit, the plan with Giran. We've faked your death," Tsu said.

"Yeah, but it's been like half a day. How did you hear about it already?" Izuku asked. Beside him, Mei vibrated in place.

"Do you need a body?" she asked with more enthusiasm than was likely warranted.

"Mei, not that I'm not grateful, but where did all this interest in medical stuff come from? Also, don't answer that." *Nice save, Izuku* . He wasn't sure he was emotionally prepared for that conversation yet. Or ever, maybe.

"For completely unrelated reasons, I happened to run into Balloon Time in the hospital. He was horribly insistent that he killed you in a cage match."

"Hey! I won that fight," Izuku protested.

"You look like you lost a fight with a boulder," Shouto said.

"I sent *Balloon Time* to the hospital," Izuku said. He was kind of surprised that he had an impact on the mountain of muscle at all. Shouto groaned.

"He's supposed to be arrested. He's supposed to be out of my hair for at least a week. And now he's not even going to be charged for murder," Shouto said.

"Wait, are you *unhappy* I'm not dead?"

A warm and a cold hand trapped Izuku's free hand between them. "Izuku. I am very, very, very grateful you are alive, but I'd also like it if you could pretend to be dead long enough for that menace to actually see the inside of a jail cell."

"He was pretty horrible," Izuku agreed.

"He's the worst."

"So... yes to the body?" Mei asked.

"That's a Nedzu question," Izuku prevaricated. He was not going to be responsible for that one. Not by a long shot.

"The plan to play dead was not a long one," Nedzu said. There was a sudden chorus of 'Principal Nedzu!' from the gathered. Izuku carefully did not relax. He was still hooked up to the needle helmet and ankle clamp.

"I just need a month," Shouto said. "Please."

"There is something I need to test, and it will require us to be seen alive within the week."

"You have a plan then?" Izuku asked. From his left he heard Tsu grumble. He gave her hand a squeeze.

"Less a plan and more a couple theories to test and contacts to follow up on."

"Are any of the contacts dangerous criminals?" Tsu asked.

"Tsu..." Izuku said.

Nedzu was quiet for too long. *Really?*

"Considering you are currently in the room with two people very connected with the underground I would think you could try something a little less *immediately dangerous* ," Tsu said. Nedzu made a high noise that Izuku had luckily not yet mapped to action so he was saved any unpleasant side effects from Mei's... things.

"You... you are correct," Nedzu said quietly. "What do you suggest?"

"Start with someone who won't immediately sell you out, for one," Tsu said. *Man she was really picking up on the passive aggression* . Tsu was usually so blunt! Izuku would be proud if it didn't make him feel guilty as shit.

"The only people I've ever really trusted I gathered at UA, and those are all scattered to the four winds. It will take something more than an internet search to find them. Todoroki, did you have any luck with that lead on Aizawa?"

Shouto squeezed Izuku's hand a little too tight. "No. We narrowed down our options to Bakuta hospital, thanks to Ochako, but instead we just uncovered a conspiracy sheltering that clown. It was our best bet, but we'll keep looking. We'll find him." Izuku squeezed back, though his knuckles ached.

"You should try and get a hold of Hound Dog, or Midnight," Tsu said. "They've been deep underground for years. What are you trying to find out?"

"My working theory is that there is one person behind my disappearance and continued captivity over the last five years. We believe they are likely the culprit for Midoriya's blindness, as well as Aizawa's disappearance. Giran told us that there is an underworld informant, known only as 'the Informant' who has been manipulating things from behind the scenes for years."

"The Informant," Shouto murmured.

"It seems they have been using news headlines as a sort of... proof of payment when they cash in their favors. They are likely male, as Giran referred to a 'he'. From the description of his interactions with this man and the emphasis on news headlines, I think we are dealing with some flavor of foresight quirk."

Well fuck.

"That's what you're going to test by being seen after being announced dead?" Izuku asked before he could stop himself. He had to be careful how candid he was around his friends right now. They were still rattled by his latest brush with danger.

"Precisely! Although news of your demise has not yet been broadcast. We will need to be careful for a few days yet."

"A foresight quirk would explain how they pulled one over on you," Shouto said. "How do you even begin to plan for that?"

"That's the fun part!" Nedzu chuckled. "We can finally enter the game as *players* , now that we know what game is being played."

"Even the most powerful quirk has limits, or rules. We just need to figure them out," Izuku said. Already he was thinking back to every manner of foresight quirk he had ever come across. They were few and far between, but each had an interesting mechanic involved. They would just have to work backward from the *effects* to the *cause* and-

"This is not a game," Tsu said.

"Of course not, young Asui. Please forgive my phrasing," Nedzu said. There was an edge to it Izuku hadn't heard since he'd last seen Nedzu behind his desk; a confidence missing from their reunion until now. "I would also like to get in touch with Hound Dog and Midnight, if you know

how to reach them."

"I will get them a message, kero," Tsu said.

"Mr. Todoroki, it would be useful for us if you could find any more information on this 'informant' from your own sources, but retrieving Aizawa is still the priority."

"Understood," Shouto said.

"We will need to keep quiet for a few days regarding Midoriya's current condition. The information we have regarding the 'informant' as well as what we know to date should be kept to in person discussions in secure locations only. Please be careful," Nedzu said.

"You think that's safe?" Izuku asked.

"Safe enough. If it were possible for them to know what was said behind closed doors among our most trusted friends... well. We wouldn't be safe regardless. There is more to gain from our people knowing the situation than from us trying to keep it quiet," Nedzu explained.

"And it works as another *test,"* Tsu said.

"Exactly so," Nedzu agreed, ignoring the barb.

"So what's next?" Izuku asked.

"That depends, how are you feeling?" Nedzu asked.

"Pretty good, actually. I have no idea what Mei's helmet is doing to my head, but it doesn't hurt. Your professional opinion, Dr. Mei?" Izuku said. Mei gave a high pitched giggle that did nothing for Izuku's nerves. "Is... that good?"

"You'll be fine. You just need to rest, and I'll get the brace adjusted and fitted. We'll have you up and walking in no time! Or rather, twenty three minutes."

"Thank you, Mei. Nedzu?" Izuku asked

"Ah yes, that brings me to another matter. Do you recognize this phone number?" and Nedzu rattled off a string of concerningly familiar digits.

"That's... that's mom's number," Izuku said. "Why... where did you get that number?"

"There are nineteen missed calls," Nedzu said like it wasn't horrifying.

"Oh my god, what? Mom doesn't even have this number... why is... what is she..."

"And four voice mails," Nedzu continued.

"What did she say!?" Izuku screeched. Cool fingers against his forehead kept him from sitting up.

"Ah, I did not have your passcode. I came in to ask for it."

"Why didn't you start with that! Oh my god, the code is 2-5-5-6-4-4-4-8!"

"Really, Izuku?" Shouto said quietly.

"Shut up! What did she say?"

Nedzu dialed the mail box and put the phone on speaker.

"...you have Four, New, Messages, to listen, press on- first new message; today, at, one, twenty three, P. M.:

Izuku tapped his fingers against Shouto's, who gave him a squeeze.

"H-h-hi Izuku, baby, just... just checking in! (nervous laughter) I know you said you wanted a bit of space but you haven't called in a while? I thought... maybe... you might like to come over for tea? See how you're settling in? Maybe... maybe introduce me to that new guide animal you were going to get? I'd really like to see you, and catch up? Please call me, honey."

Not... too bad? Izuku guessed that him showing up in the news as *Deku* of all things was probably a *little* alarming. It just sounded like a regular call to check in, other than the fact that she was calling his *unlisted phone.*

" *End of Message. To repeat this message, press one, to delete it press 3, to save it press... next message, today, at, two, oh, one, P.M* .;

"Oh, I just thought... well, maybe you don't know how to check your messages right now? Because... because you can't see the phone? I... uh. Maybe it's easiest if I just keep calling you, I don't know why I'm leaving this message, but if you do get it, uh, call me? Please?"

Izuku felt sympathetically uncomfortable. He would not tell her he listened to these messages, he swore to himself. Least he could do, really.

" *End of- Next message, today, at, three, nineteen, P.M.;*

"Izuku! Um. I thought you were going to pick up that time, sorry..."

Oh mom.

"End- Next message, today, at, four, oh, nine, P.M.;

"Please come home, Izuku."

Shit. His mom needed him.

Keigo settled in comfortably against the tree trunk, sipping his third coffee of the day. He didn't really need it per se, not this late, but it was a fun buzz. He was hidden in the foliage of an evergreen, far from the blossoming trees people would be tempted to look up at. It was rare that he was given a mission where he needed to use actual stealth, so he savored the feeling of playing spy.

Across the park sitting on a bench was the newest member of their little task force. Uraraka Ochako, aka Uravity. They had met earlier in the day; her bubbly enthusiasm a perfect cover for.... Well. A cover, he was pretty sure. It seemed the commission was suspicious of her connections and thought they would be able to leverage her involvement to catch a lead on the vigilante network.

A network that Keigo was becoming less and less convinced was an actual thing. He'd seen more

organized children's sport games. There was frequent vigilante activity, enough activity to drive a bug right up the ass of the commission, but organization?

Regardless, there were always good snacks at the vigilante task force meetings, and with the addition of Uravity a great deal of entertainment. Now he was being paid to sit up in a quiet tree, sipping a lovely coffee and listen to Uraraka tell a raven all about her experience sitting in on an ultra important secret task force meeting. He had hidden a couple feathers under the slats of the bench to experience it in stereo.

"...and would you believe who was in there when I walked in? Endeavor!" Uraraka said.

"Took took," said the raven, pecking at crumbs falling from Uraraka's take-out box as she waved it around enthusiastically.

"I thought I was just going to be shut up in some boring stuffy old back room with busy work, but no! Endeavor and Hawks! I had no idea they even had time for meetings. You could tell he was *not happy* to see me, I'll tell you that!"

"Took," agreed the raven.

"He was all 'If you think I'm going to work with the air-headed third ex-wife of my son, then you don't know me at all!'. Spoiler, I do know him. So I said 'Seventh ex-spouse' because he honest to god sparks when you get him riled up enough. But he's there at an official meeting for very serious business so he can't actually start a fight. He tried, though."

"Gr-r-r-ook-rook," said the raven. It hopped a few paces forward to make a pass at the fish in her dinner box, but missed as she jerked it back.

"Greedy," she said. She picked a small piece out and left it on the bench for the raven to swiftly gobble up. "Anyway, the whole thing is a complete mess. I thought heroes in the top ten actually knew what they were doing! Well, that's not fair. They're not detectives. Or Deku. But! It's a bit of a shock to have the curtain pulled away."

Ouch, Uraraka.

"Took took," said the raven.

"So, turns out they've been looking for this," Uraraka paused, looking around the immediate vicinity for listening ears. She didn't look up, though, and not at the tree where Keigo sat patiently. "...big underground network," she whispered. "But all they have to go on are isolated incidents. They have graphed all the data points and it looks like a three year old got ahold of a stamp. All over the place, right?"

Keigo is unsure why she was explaining all this to a raven. It was terrible op sec, but it also seemed to serve no purpose. Nothing she was saying so far was specific enough to be useful, even if the raven was in on it. Honestly it was just hurtful.

The raven mostly seemed to be there for the fish, which it was sneaking as she tapped thoughtfully at her chin.

"And now Deku's missing," she said to herself. Ah yes, Deku. The reason they had gotten Uravity involved in the first place. The commission was both incredibly wary and completely done with the hero. Even blind he was a concern. They would love nothing more than to dig up something that completely trashed his reputation, but couldn't be seen targeting him. Exposing a connection to the vigilante network (which the commission had been demonizing for years) would be an excellent

angle. It didn't have to be that, though, any scandal would do in a pinch. Though not *the* Scandal. Anything the young Todoroki touched turned to PR gold. The people loved him.

"Anyway, I'm not sure what they expect me to do about it. I can react to a call out with the best of them, but I'm usually the last to know what's actually going on," Uraraka sighed. "Oh well, the snacks are good."

Standing, Uraraka stretched. She crumpled up the wrapping of her dinner, placed it delicately on top of the overfilled trash can and sauntered off with a whistle. The raven croaked and took off. As she left the park, she made sure to stop at each trash can she passed and placed something in each one.

What was she doing?

Keigo leaned forward to try and make out what she was leaving. He sent a feather to snag one of the closer ones. It was a... sticky note? Cat shaped. She had drawn a face on it along with the word 'hunt'. Keigo groaned. Was he going to have to go through every garbage can here? This felt like tracking Scandal all over again.

It didn't have to come to that yet, though. First he would wait and see if anyone came to pick the papers up. It was nearly sunset, but the air was warm and smelled of spring. He sent small feathers off to each can in the park to alert him to any change. He could afford to wait a little while. He settled back with a sigh.

Behind him on a branch the raven said "Took took took."

Keigo almost fell out of the tree.

--earlier--

"So now I'm a double agent! *On the vigilante task force,"* Ochako said. She gripped Shouto's upper arms and shook him for emphasis. He took it stoically.

"I'm proud," he said. "Very proud."

"I know right!? I'm going to be our inside man. Or woman, rather. I'll know everything before it's going to happen! I'll sow discord and misinformation!" Ochako cackled.

"You will be magnificent. But. We also already have someone on the inside," Shouto said.

"What? When did that happen? How?" Ochako never got the first crack at anything, dammit.

"Endeavor leads the team," Shouto said calmly, like he wasn't cruelly pulling the rug out from under her. What was the point of being a secret spy when someone else was already doing the work. Wait.

"Endeavor is working for you?"

"Hardly," Shouto snorted.

"Then how...?"

"He tries to recruit me for every vigilante bust they plan."

"Huh. And you've never... taken him up on it?"

"It's tempting, but then I'd have to work with him. So no."

"So... what am I going to do then?" Ochako asked. She hadn't even begun and she was redundant.

"You, my darling seventh ex, third in the ranking, are going to *sow discord and misinformation.* "

"What? But..."

"There's no way Endeavor would agree to actually hiring one of my ex-spouses to the team. They are likely suspicious of you and are going to put you under surveillance under the guise of having you participate.

"You won't be held back by actually having to gather intelligence (not that there's a lot of intelligence to gather...) so you will be free to plan your campaign however you like. All our resources are at your disposal. You should act clueless, but leave them plenty of useless clues to follow up on. Are you prepared to accept this mission?"

Ochako couldn't bite back the grin fast enough.

"Oh boy, *am I!"*

Chapter End Notes

Enter Inko. Those voice mails were my favorite part of this chapter.

Enter secret agent of chaos, Ochako. I know nothing about Hawks. I'm just going to assume he doesn't see the vigilantes as a huge priority, even though he's been told to make it one.

Exit Dr. Mei!

Also three guesses as to what Izuku's passcode is. It's pointless fun, but you get points if you guess right.

Held in your Honor

Chapter Summary

Hitoshi and Aizawa stop by for tea.

Izuku crashes the party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"My son is *retired,"* Midoriya Inko greeted them at the door. Stress lined her face and there were deep shadows under her eyes. A tissue was tucked into one hand.

Great start . At least she hadn't mistaken them for grifters. *Again.*

"Izu's in trouble," Hitoshi said. He was edging one foot forward toward the door jam in case he screwed up the opening salvo. He'd got his other hand tucked in the crook of Aizawa's elbow to keep the man from making a run for it. He hadn't explained where they were going for reasons. Most of those reasons were that Aizawa would argue him out of it.

"My baby is *out of the game.* He's *safe* , now," Mrs. Midoriya said. Her voice was rough and cracked at the end. It sounded rehearsed; it had the cadence of song or mantra. Hitoshi caught her eye and held it.

"Please," he said. Mrs. Midoriya's bottom lip trembled. She gave a hearty sniff and Aizawa flinched.

"I can't... I..." her voice trembled. She pressed the tissue against each eye, but it did nothing to stop the tears from falling down her cheeks. Hitoshi's eyes watered sympathetically. *Dammit Izuku* . "I can't *do this... can't keep doing this* ..." she whispered.

Taking a chance, Hitoshi dropped Aizawa's arm and opened his arms for a hug. Mrs. Midoriya fell into them with a sob and he just held her for a little while. This was not the first time he had needed to comfort her. This was also not the first time it was his fault.

"I'm sorry," he whispered toward the top of her head. "I'm sorry. We need your help." Against his chest she took a big shuddering sigh before nodding. He waited through three more heavy sighs until she patted his back and pulled away.

"Ok," she said, taking a breath. "Ok. You can. You can come in. Do you want tea?"

"Coffee?" he asked. She swatted his arm.

"You know I don't keep it in the house. You'll have tea," she nodded. She turned away, leaving the door open. Hitoshi turned to Aizawa to find the man halfway down the hallway, hand on the wall to guide him.

"Really." Hitoshi caught up with him, hovering at his side. Reaching for his arm now would *one hundred percent* result in getting punched. Aizawa glared ahead.

"No. I'm not going in there," he said.

"It's the best option," Hitoshi said.

"I'm not responsible for you anymore. You're both going to cry. There's no coffee. I'm going to go find a tree or something."

"What are you, a child!?" Hitoshi asked. Aizawa glared in his direction, shuffling another couple steps down the hallway.

"Ugh, I'm not going to use my quirk on you. I am going to use *reason* and you are going to accept it like a *reasonable person,"* Hitoshi said.

"I don't have to be reasonable. I'm dealing with trauma," Aizawa said.

"You only admit to trauma when it gets you out of something."

"No shit."

"Nobody's going to cry on you!"

"You say that..." Aizawa said. *Of course he's going to be stubborn... time for some good old fashioned guilt.*

"It's the quickest way to see Nedzu," Hitoshi said quietly. "The most direct route to *helping him."* Aizawa stopped.

"I can't see," he said. *Fuck, word choice.*

"Not see, then, but meet him. Make sure he's ok."

"No, I mean I can't *help him* if I *can't see.* I'm useless to him right now."

Oh right.

"Look, you don't even know how bad it is, maybe..."

"Oh, it's bad."

"What? Have you... How..." *Rephrase, don't use questions.* Hitoshi took a breath. "What?"

Good job Hitoshi!

"There were records... recordings. Unique things that gave proof of life when I tried to refuse to cooperate. He'd play them for me when I 'forgot my place'. It's bad," Aizawa said softly. Hitoshi had a sudden realization that perhaps Aizawa wasn't really trying to avoid other people's emotions.

"You don't want to face Nedzu right now."

"I have no idea how I'm going to handle it. It's one thing to see him again with a solution, but without being able to help him... I'm the one that did *that* to him. I'm the last person he should see."

Hitoshi dragged a hand down his face. He understood, he really did, but he couldn't afford to grant this mercy right now. They needed to meet with Izuku together; there was no ignoring the weight of Aizawa's experience.

"C'mon. I know you don't want to, but we need you. Please," Hitoshi said. Aizawa glared ahead of him, hair shifting in an unfelt wind. Hitoshi sighed. "We'll leave the door open a crack, just... please don't stay out here too long. We really can't be seen." Aizawa nodded and Hitoshi turned away.

Hitoshi was on his second cup of tea before Aizawa made his way quietly into the apartment. No one commented on the redness of his eyes, but Mrs. Midoriya tucked a couple tissues under his hand before making the first of *many* phone calls to Izuku's secret phone.

"It might just be on silent. It's not like he's going to see the messages, and he'll be pretty paranoid about letting anyone else use the phone," Hitoshi comforted her. It was an awkward afternoon of pacing and stilted conversation. Tension wound tighter and tighter as they got no response. Hitoshi gave them until the morning to come up with a new plan. He took the couch, leaving Izuku's old room (and its eye-bleeding décor) to Aizawa, who could fall asleep anywhere. Even on a bed a foot too short for him.

In the morning Mrs Midoriya surprised them with the kindness of take-out coffee. They left the conversation to the morning news while they brooded over their breakfast. Still no response from Izuku. Aizawa was scowling but the tension in his shoulders had loosened.

"..and this just in!" the news announcer started cheerily. *"We have some... grave news."* The announcer schooled his face into one of somber reflection, though his eyes still held buoyant energy. *"It seems today we have lost Pro-Hero Deku. Reports of his death were announced with the morning Herald in an exclusive interview with the infamous Balloon Time. The news has shocked and..."*

No.

"...been confirmed..."

No this wasn't...

"... such shocking development right after his tragic retirement..."

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"...could not be reached for comment, but a vigil is planned..."

Hitoshi was... vaguely aware of the news report continuing. It was. It was a weird feeling, that the man was able to keep prattling on when Hitoshi's brain was reduced to static. Each breath he took was the same as any breath he had taken before, the clock kept ticking but. Shouldn't something fundamental... have changed? Shouldn't it... feel different?

"No," Aizawa said from beside him. "This isn't. No. *No."*

Mrs Midoriya, who had been on the verge of tears the entire time they'd been there, had gone quiet and still. Her hands shook as she unlocked her phone and flipped through her messages.

"No one has tried to contact me. No one... no one has phoned me. Why are they reporting this before anyone has phoned me," she said. "This isn't real, is it?" She turned to Hitoshi. "Is it?"

Numbly, Hitoshi took the phone from her grasp and looked for the article. He had to scroll through three articles *about* the article before finding the headline he was looking for. A local news service, *ShiHoshi,* he noted idly.

"Someone... they have to contact me first, don't they?" Mrs Midoriya said. Her hands twisted together and pulled at her skin. "Isn't it a protocol... or... basic decency... how can they... I'm his *mother* . This... can't be real."

Hitoshi tried to clear his throat. It was dry. He tried to start reading the article but the first word wouldn't come out. He scrolled through it, eyes catching on gruesome details that made his stomach roll. *Who wrote this? Who had the stomach to write this?*

He backed out of the article, looking for a paper he could trust, assuming there was such a thing.

Pro-Hero Deku confirmed dead.

"Nobody is using his name," Hitoshi said. It didn't sound like himself. Like something unclogged, tears were suddenly starting in his eyes. "They can't even..." he choked. He looked over at Mrs. Midoriya and as soon as she met his eyes she let out a sob.

"This isn't happening," she said to him. Hitoshi's shoulders shook as he tried to stifle the sobs, gasping for breath when the pressure became too much. Aizawa reached out a hand to him, gripping his shoulder. It hurt, but Hitoshi leaned into it. He reached across the table for Mrs. Midoriya's hands, pulling them apart and gripping them between his own.

"I don't know what's happening," Hitoshi told her, surprised at how even he managed to speak. "But we're going to find out, and we'll figure this out together."

Even if there was nothing to figure out.

Even if it was just confirming the worst.

Mei had insisted that he stay horizontal at least overnight. Izuku had not agreed. Shouto had iced the weird needle helmet to the floor. So. He'd stayed horizontal overnight.

He was not well rested.

Hidden in the hoodie Nedzu guided him through the streets to his mom's place. No one was out this early, luckily. It gave him plenty of time to devise a list of everything that could be wrong, starting from plumbing issues and ending at terminal cancer.

Or villains.

Nedzu flicked Izuku's ear every time his muttering went from catastrophic to a self-incriminating 'this is all my fault, she wouldn't be in danger if not for me'. Which was... irritatingly often. His ear was very sore.

"We're at the building now, Midoirya," Nedzu said. Izuku stopped.

"Is there anyone around?"

"No one is outside, and the trees provide quite a bit of cover," Nedzu confirmed.

"I think... I think it would be best to avoid the cameras in the lobby," Izuku said.

"Is your mother on the ground floor?"

"No, third, but it shouldn't be too hard to scale. Balconies line up. *Oh no, if it's so simple for me to climb, how easy would it be for a thief? Or anyone! Why didn't I think of that when we were picking it out, such an obvious vulnerability. I'm a terrible son* -OW!"

"Stop it. Are you okay to climb with your ankle or are you lying?"

Izuku tested his weight on the brace. It held his foot rather stiffly, bracing it against his calf, but fit under his sock like a second skin. "It will actually be a lot easier to climb with the brace. Mei does good work."

He could feel Nedzu nod against his shoulder. He held back a flinch as his whiskers tickled his neck. "Alright, and a window entry will be unexpected if there are bad actors involved."

"Do you really think there's someone in there with her?"

"We don't know anything, caution is best," Nedzu said. He flicked Izuku's ear again.

"Ow! I didn't say anything!"

"You were thinking it."

Together they navigated up to Izuku's old bedroom window via a couple floors of balcony and handy façade. He was able to unlatch it from the outside, something he'd set up in case he ever needed to sneak back in (' *Such a terrible idea, really not secure, anyone could get in here, what was I think* -Ow!'). Izuku was midway through sliding a slender piece of metal along the track when they heard a wail from inside the apartment.

"Mom!" Izuku hissed. Nedzu adjusted his grip on Izuku's shoulder ready to leap into the apartment as soon as it was clear. The metal probe slipped from the catch. "Fuck!" Izuku swore. Inside, low voices rumbled between his mom's keening. *Someone else was in there* . The metal caught this time and Izuku was able to pry the window open. Nedzu launched off his shoulder and Izuku had to scramble to grip the sill.

He threw a leg up and rolled over his desk and onto the floor. In the next room exclamations of surprise and shock filtered through. Something crashed to the floor. Izuku was on his feet in a second, but he approached the door more cautiously, hands outstretched. His feet caught on bedsheets... on the floor? before his hands found the poster covered wall. He crept quietly down the hall, tucking himself as close to it as he could, trying to determine what he'd be walking into. He reached the end of the hallway.

Silence.

Well. Not silence, but stillness. There were heavy, gasping breaths from at least three people in the living room. The television was on, droning on about...

Deku... being found dead. And how much of a tragedy it all was. Poor quirkless hero.

Right.

He was in so much trouble.

"Izu..." said a low voice. Hitoshi? Izuku relaxed his shoulders. If Hitoshi was here, things were probably fine. "Izu, what the fuck."

"Uh, I'm not dead?" Izuku said.

"Izuku..." his mom said, voice thick with tears. Two heavy steps and she was there, arms tight around his torso. "Baby. You're okay, you're okay..." Izuku found himself crumbling, adrenaline leaving him in a rush as relief kicked in. He wrapped his arms around his mom (best hugs he'd ever get) and sobbed. Kicked off by his own tears, his mom wailed and they were both lost to it. He rocked with his mom, breathing in her familiar shampoo, feeling for the first time in over a month that maybe things were going to be okay.

He cried harder.

He'd been stressed, yes, but he hadn't had a chance to just... let go like this for a while. It probably helped that he couldn't see Hitoshi's expression or Nedzu's carefully tilted head meant to give him privacy. He'd deal with the embarrassment later, right now he just held his mom.

A large weight thumped into his side, enfolding both him and his mom in an overly warm embrace. Hitoshi. His friend sniffled through his own tears as he rocked with them, and Izuku knocked his head forward into Hitoshi's chin.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Hitoshi whispered. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"You thought you said I wouldn't have to deal with tears," came a third voice. Izuku's breath caught in his throat. Hitoshi huffed a half-hearted laugh.

"Nobody's crying on *you,* Sensei," he said.

"Mr. Aizawa? You found him? He's okay? *He's here?"* Izuku's questions got progressively higher pitched as he went. "He's okay right, he's fine? I... where..."

His mom and Hitoshi loosened their hold, but didn't let go. His mom tucked herself under his arm and Hitoshi kept one arm draped over his shoulder. Izuku stumbled forward under their weight, tugging them along towards the voice. They kept him from running into furniture and soon enough he had his hand gripped in a familiar calloused one.

"You look like shit," his old teacher said. Izuku blushed and ducked his head.

"I uh, sorry. Harder to... dodge... now..." Izuku said.

"Shit. No. I mean. I can't see either. *It was meant to be a joke,* how bad is your face!?" Mr. Aizawa said.

He was blind too!? A thrill went up Izuku's spine. They were onto something big, he knew it. The air felt electric with the possibilities. Where had he been? Did he know who had blinded them? Was it the same condition, the same quirk? Was it a quirk? How had he... what was...

"You are the worst at humor," Hitoshi said. "You are never allowed to give me shit about anything ever again."

"Shut up," Mr. Aizawa said, and a hand was on the bandages on his face.

"Don't poke his injuries," Hitoshi said, and the hand disappeared.

"How bad is it?"

Hitoshi hummed. "Nothing worse than Deku's debut. He's standing under his own power, at least."

"That is a *low bar."*

"Hey, it's just some bruising and a sprained ankle. Maybe a concussion, but Mei fixed it!" Izuku protested. At his side his mom stiffened.

"Sit down, leg elevated," she said, tugging him down onto a soft cushion. She pulled both his legs up and onto the arm of the couch. Clammy hands were rested against his forehead before being hastily retracted. "I'll get you some ice, Hitoshi set him up with some pillows."

"I'm fine!" Izuku protested. Someone snorted.

"You're a liar," Hitoshi said, tucking cushions under his back. "And you're going to sit still." Izuku grumbled while Hitoshi tugged him this way until he was satisfied. Izuku wiggled out of place as soon as he let go. He was not going to just sit by and be manhandled (he'd already been through that enough the previous day).

"Hey, where'd Nedzu go?" Izuku asked, anything to get the attention off him. He had been unusually silent; Izuku had expected him to be in the middle of the fussing as he'd been the one *missing* for five years.

"Uh..." There was a clatter in the kitchen as a metal lid hit the floor and rolled. "He kinda... ran into the kitchen? We weren't... uh, he looked kinda freaked so we weren't going to crowd him," Hitoshi said quietly. There was a catch of breath; probably Mr. Aizawa because his mom was murmuring something in the kitchen, probably getting the ice.

Oh... oh dear.

"Mom, just let him make the tea!" Izuku yelled. He'd noticed Nedzu was less verbal when emotional, lately, and it was much enhanced without tea. And his mother... well.

She *fussed.*

"It's fine, honey!" she called. Izuku had to contain the noise of exasperation. His mom was just *helping* . If she didn't want to listen to advice it was her kitchen.

"Izu..." Hitoshi said quietly. "How..." Hitoshi paused. "How has Nedzu been?"

"He's ok? Well, right now he's probably pretty cranky about someone standing in the way of him making tea, *don't do that if you value your limbs* , but I mean he's fine all things considered? He hasn't told me a whole bunch about what happened but think he's okay overall? Why? does he look bad? *Is he visibly hurt 'cause I can't tell..."*

"No, he... looks fine," Hitoshi said. "I mean... how is he... with all... his quirk...?" Hitoshi asked eloquently, and suddenly Izuku understood.

Oops.

Izuku covered his face gently and breathed out. This should have been the first thing out of his mouth instead of his inane 'I'm not dead'. He was tired, and he was missing things. He needed to be better than this! Oh Mr. Aizawa...

"Nedzu! Mr. Aizawa still thinks he turned your quirk off! Come fix it," Izuku called.

"What," said Aizawa.

There was another clatter and what sounded like ceramic dropping on tile and the rustle of small footsteps on carpet. Izuku flung a hand in that direction. "Don't give him a heart attack."

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Nedzu. "Aizawa, you didn't turn off my quirk. You can't have."

"But... how... *Nedzu* what? But...!" Aizawa's voice sounded strained.

"While it's true that I'm a quirked animal, yours has never had an effect on mutations."

"Your... your intelligence is a mutation?"

"Oh my god..." Hitoshi whispered to himself.

"...Sure," Nedzu said. Izuku bit down on hysterical giggles.

"This whole time... But the recordings! You... you sounded so... and. He was so sure. But this whole time... you were fine? How... but *why?"*

Nedzu chuckled. "I'm sure you, of all people, know the value of a logical ruse."

Izuku face-palmed harder.

Chapter End Notes

Obligatory 'show up to your own funeral' trope.

Also still pretty sure this story is still just an excuse for punch lines.

And punches.

So far this is my favorite chapter. We'll see if it can be outdone by... *checks outline notes* chapter 22.

Council

Chapter Summary

In which I write a five way conversation.

Chapter Notes

I don't know what I'm thinking, putting this many characters in a room. From now on, max of three occupancy.

checks outline notes

Shit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nedzu hung limp in Aizawa's hold. The man's heart was beating concerningly fast, and Nedzu wasn't interested in adding to his stress. While physical affection was one of those few things that transcended human-animal differences, Nedzu hadn't actually grown up with it. He was clueless when it came to these things; when you start hugging, when you stop hugging, what you're supposed to do with your paws. Left to his own devices, he'd just curl up next to or around anyone who could stand him, but early human interaction had curbed him of it for the most part.

Sure, Aizawa had never minded him riding in his scarf, or on his shoulder. He'd never bat an eye when his boss leapt off furniture to hitch a ride; never said anything one way or the other. But in Nedzu's flow chart of human behavior Aizawa was classified as an employee, and physical affection was *discouraged* . Ex-employee didn't clarify the matter. So he was a little lost at the appropriate response. He was ninety percent sure that squirming out of the hold would not meet his end goal of 'comfort Aizawa and prevent heart attack'. He was also pretty sure he didn't want to.

Nedzu looked over at Midoriya, but his blank stare helped nothing. It occurred to Nedzu then that their method of guidance was firmly *one way* and that perhaps it would be prudent to mix some call-response in there for discrete communication.

They couldn't have silent conversations anymore, after all.

Well. Not *visually* , but Nedzu also wasn't in arms reach.

Aizawa let out a long shuddery breath and loosened his hold. Nedzu dropped to the floor, immediately chillier. He fluffed up his fur.

"Sorry. Sorry, I shouldn't have..." Aizawa said, hands gripping his knees. "That wasn't... professional?"

Ah. Perhaps Aizawa had as much idea what he was doing as Nedzu. Nedzu could work with that.

"It's good to see you too, Aizawa." Thump the foot so Aizawa can sense his distance, brush a

whisker in warning and place paw firmly on hand. Aizawa did not flinch, and his shoulders relaxed. Gesture success!

Also the heartbeat seemed to be calming down, color was returning to his face. Nedzu could move on to the next topic. Mrs. Midoriya came in at that point with a tray of tea and five cups.

A *fine* tea set, all arranged perfectly.

Nedzu bristled.

"Thank you, Mrs. Midoriya," he said. She smiled at him, determined glint in her eye. Nedzu missed his large oak desk with intimidating wall panels. He missed having a territory.

"Any time, just let me know what you need. Now Izuku dear, let's see about that ice."

Shinsou moved out of the way of Midoriya's mother as she set about checking over her son with much calmer hands. He came over and pulled a chair out for Nedzu, offering a hand up. Nedzu bypassed the chair and sat on the table. Normally he would aim for a chair to not disrupt the social order, but he felt like he needed the height advantage. It was too bad that Midoriya was sitting on the couch, otherwise he could have a higher vantage on his shoulder.

On her way back to the kitchen Mrs. Midoriya dropped a small cushion next to him. Completely unflappable for such an emotional person.

Shinsou took a seat next to Aizawa and across from Nedzu. Mrs. Midoriya brought them snacks and took a seat as well. It was quiet for a time.

"Now what?" Shinsou said after a long pause. The silence felt like a void; deep pressure pushing on their ears and bodies and minds. Nedzu could observe the facts but nothing seemed to fit together into a coherent whole; there was tea, there was Aizawa, there was Shinsou, there was Midoriya and his mother. There was a dragon out there somewhere who would devour them, who had devoured years of them. Great big gaping expanses of time just... lost. The order of their lives was not the same as it was five years ago.

What were they, now?

Who were they, now?

' *Now what* ' indeed.

The moment felt as delicate as a soap bubble. One moment of quiet stillness before it broke and the rest of the world came crashing in. A world that had changed so much that Nedzu barely had a part in it.

What were his plans, his ideas, against the weight of the world that was perfectly happy to turn without him in it?

Who was he to demand anything of these strong, honest people?

"God this is awkward," said Midoriya from the couch. "It feels like you're all having some silent conversation without me, but that would exclude Mr. Aizawa too. Someone please start talking."

"Where should we start?" asked Shinsou, a desperate edge in his voice. "There's just... Where do we even start? I only planned up to finding Aizawa."

"My entire plan was just... finding Nedzu," said Aizawa.

Nedzu laughed. "Initially Midoriya and I set out to find Shinsou. And now we've all succeeded! Good job team. We have all been found. As Shinsou so succinctly put it, now what? Or perhaps I should say, where do we start."

"What is the most immediate threat?" Mrs Midoriya said.

"Mom!" said Midoriya, sounding scandalized. Mrs. Midoriya twitched her lips into a watery smile.

"I just listened to a news report that you were dead, honey. I'm not ready to repeat the experience for real."

"You never want to talk about hero stuff!? You always say you're better off knowing!"

"That's what *you* say, dear."

"You always burst into tears though?"

"Currently crying, my love. I would rather work through the fear and be there for you than be ignorant on this one. They *blinded* you, Izuku, they targeted *you* . I'm assuming since you faked your death, they want you *dead* as well. I will do anything I can to keep that from happening."

"Mom..." Midoriya said softly. Shinsou sniffed and buried his head in his arms. Aizawa looked like he wanted to be anywhere else.

Just like that, Nedzu thought. Just like that they weren't a collection of names and skills and faces sitting in some apartment. They weren't pieces being manipulated with his schemes and plans; pawns in a game. They were people he could *protect* . They were reasons to act.

"Alright then," Nedzu said. He took a sip of tea (hideously delicious, damn the Midoriya matron) and said "Alright." Because he could. His mind was turning and spinning the problem faster than he would be able to articulate to anyone other than perhaps Midoriya.

"I believe we are working against one man, or a very small group of people, and that there is a foresight quirk involved." There. Get the scary part out first.

"Fuck." said Aizawa. "Fuck that... makes *sense.* "

"Oh?"

"This is the first successful escape attempt I've made."

"You mean *I made* ," muttered Shinsou.

"Shut up. It's not the first *attempt* , though. I thought. I thought I was just... losing my edge. They kept me at a hospital *that serves the public* . There were only two guards and my captor. It should not have taken me two years to see the outside of those walls. Metaphorically speaking."

"You're right," Nedzu said. Aizawa was nothing if not persistent. "And considering you and Shinsou have made it out unscathed without knowing there was a foresight quirk, what has changed?"

Midoriya made a noise of interest. "Hitoshi, how the hell did you find him? And how did you get him out?"

Shinsou groaned and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Luck? But really. It's a wonder we didn't find anything before."

"What do you mean?"

"Veteran Affairs has a contract with Bakuta hospital to 'process' the quirked animals in their programs. A whole-ass contract. Kendo and some of the others have been working at smuggling them out of the system."

"When did you talk to Kendo?"

"At her retirement dinner?"

"Kendo's retired!? Since when?"

"Seriously Izu? That was like, a month and a half ago. Do you live under a rock? It was all over the news."

"No, *I* was all over the news. Or my ass was," Midoriya said darkly.

"Honey, nobody will remember by the time Shouto's wedding rolls around. It will be fine."

"They had *banners* , mom. I couldn't go on patrol for a week."

"Wait, was that real?" asked Aizawa. Midoriya hid his head under a pillow.

"How the hell did you hear about it, Sensei?"

"I was a prisoner, but I was a prisoner on this *planet* , problem child. I think everyone knows."

Midoriya groaned, the sound of a tortured man. "And that, Hitoshi, is why I didn't know about Kendo. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well I was going to, and then I got kidnapped."

"You *did* get kidnapped then!" Midoriya said. "Are you alright? What happened?"

"Well they locked me in a room and I escaped," Shinsou said ('Shut up' muttered Aizawa) "And then because I was in the building I decided to have a look around. Their filing... I have no idea how they ever got anything done. I swear. I just set up a desk for myself and *nobody questioned it* . I was trying to figure out who was targeting me, but I'm not even sure they knew. So I lived in the vents for a month, switched Nedzu's paperwork and decided to take a crack at Bakuta, for Kendo's operation if nothing else."

"And you couldn't have called anybody in that whole time to let them know you were alive?" Midoriya asked.

"Well I figured out you were in the hospital so I didn't send anything more than that initial location."

"And...?"

"And what? I figured sending Nedzu to you would help. And it did, didn't it?"

"You didn't call *anybody else* ?"

"I don't *trust* anybody else. I also don't trust the phone system."

"Oh my god Hitoshi," Midoriya said.

"Don't *Oh my god Hitoshi* me, I just got a text from your *personal phone* asking us to meet up. If anything we haven't been paranoid enough."

Nedzu glanced at Midoriya. They hadn't sent a text.

"Uh... we didn't send you a text," Midoriya said. Nedzu liked having an 'inane question' proxy. Helped him keep an air of mystique.

"No shit Izuku! But please tell me you didn't bring your phone here."

"No we... destroyed... my phone," Midoriya said. "We just kept the underground one. Wait. If you *got* a text... where's your phone? And why did you decide to come to my *mom's house* ?"

"Chain of trust, Izu. Your mom is the safest contact between the two of us. Also my phone is in five pieces in my pocket. It's fine."

"Fine? *It's my mom's house* . I don't want her involved in any of this!"

"Still in the room, honey," Mrs. Midoriya said.

"You couldn't have, like... used one of the safe houses?"

"No way to know if they've been compromised, Izu. I was out of the loop for a month. And I sure as hell am not contacting Shouto to find out. His operational security is terrible," Shinsou said.

"Oh I know. Did you know he thought I *didn't know* about the vigilante network?"

"What? You were there when he set it up!"

"That's what I said!"

"Focus," Aizawa snapped.

"Yes Sensei!" Midoriya and Shinsou both straightened to attention. Midoriya shivered.

"Why does that still terrify me?" he whispered to himself.

"Conditioning," Nedzu and Aizawa said at once. Midorya and Shinsou shuddered.

"I would like to hear how you went about getting Aizawa out of the hospital so cleanly," Nedzu said. The foresight quirk was likely heavily related to getting information from headlines and the news. An impersonal preview, though whether it had to do with the news itself or if the news was just a convenient medium remained to be seen.

Already he suspected the one behind this likely had an easier time manipulating large, newsworthy events than small underground ones. The fact that they had been safe so far, and that Shinsou had avoided capture was a point in favor of that theory.

He would need to be careful not to underestimate his opponent. He'd been brought low by this villain before.

"Sure," said Shinsou. "The rescue for Aizawa was pretty simple, all things considered. There was

some commotion up front, so I went in through a side door. I stole some scrubs, blended in and started looking for the quirked animals. Before I could get anywhere with that I found a couple... nurses? complaining about an unruly patient."

"I'm not 'unruly'," Aizawa said. Shinsou ignored him.

"One was laughing at the other about the patient complaining that he 'wasn't a nurse' and taking a swing at him. I waited for them to finish and caught the man before he could go back to his 'unruly' patient. I got a story from him about him and one other guy being assigned guard duty, and it kind of unraveled from there. Got the room number, snuck in, found Sensei. He was drugged to the gills. I wheeled him out."

Nedzu frowned. It seemed too simple an escape to succeed when a man like Aizawa had been successfully held captive for two years.

Aizawa had always aced his performance reviews. He wasn't one unused to subtlety and espionage. He was also more paranoid than even Shinsou could likely comprehend. There is no way that Aizawa would not have been able to make an escape just as clean and quiet as Shinsou's rescue. There was something missing here, or some foible of the future quirk that didn't work with Shinsou's.

Perhaps if it were to take into account everyone's actions as they would make them with free will. Shinsou would definitely throw a wrench in predictions based on that.

But then... why *headlines in the media?*

"You said there were two guards, Aizawa," Nedzu said. Aizawa grunted an affirmative. "If Shinsou's quirk disrupts the foresight quirk, it would not explain how you still succeeded in escaping with only one guard compromised."

"Ah! Sorry," Shinsou said, looking embarrassed. "I actually tracked down both guards and, uh, *suggested* they leave town. I, uh, might have *suggested* that their operation had been busted and they needed to escape before they got caught?"

Silence.

"Hitoshi you are the worst at debriefing," Midoriya said.

"Shut up, Izu, *you're* the worst," Shinsou said, head falling onto his elbows. Still not definitive on Shinsou's quirk being a cancel. Nedzu would need more data.

"You need revision," Aizawa said.

"Delightful! Then perhaps you might be an example and give your debriefing, Aizawa," Nedzu said. Aizawa hated debriefing. He let out a long sigh using all of the air in his lungs before starting.

"Two years ago I was investigating yet another small syndicate that survived Nedzu's dead man's switch when I was captured," Aizawa started.

"Wait, was that what all those leads were? Enemies of Nedzu's that *survived* ?" Shinsou asked.

"It was only logical."

"But there must have been... so many!?" Shinsou said. Nedzu frowned. Did he doubt his dead

man's switch, or did he overestimate the number of Nedzu's enemies? Did *Nedzu* underestimate the number of his enemies?

"Less when I got through with them. Anyway. I was held for a week without food in a dark cell. Once I was sufficiently weakened and the tranquilizers were out of my system, they took me out. I thought that this would prove to be my opportunity for escape, but I was wrong. They took me to a hospital room with a man and an unconscious Nedzu."

Nedzu closed his eyes and just... breathed. He was... angry? Scared? Excited? He didn't have a name for the jolt of energy that ran through him. Aizawa had been so close. A warm hand patted his shoulder and he shared a look with Shinsou. He leaned into it.

"The man had a quirk that could cause temporary total blindness," Aizawa said.

"Fuck," said Izuku. Aizawa nodded.

"We fought, briefly, and he used it on me. Skin contact, lasted a few seconds after he got away. He calls it Blackout. In the end I was left in the room with Nedzu and a choice; use the dose of trigger he left me and apply the permanent effect of my quirk, or refuse and let him die."

"I'm sorry," Nedzu said. Aizawa jerked his head up.

"What? Why? Why are you apologizing? *I'm* sorry!"

"No... it's. Hmm." Nedzu hunched his shoulders. "You did nothing wrong. You saved my life, but you felt like you were doing something unforgivable. I'm sorry you were put in that position."

"I should have gotten you out," Aizawa said.

"In a way, you did," Nedzu said. "After that point they underestimated me. I would never have had the chance to escape them if they thought I was still a threat. Without your help I wouldn't have made it."

Aizawa gave a strangled chuckle. "All this time I was... beating myself up. Imagining all the things you would say to me given the chance and. All things I *did wrong and missed* . And now you're here... saying things like *that* ," Aizawa said. He rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I just. What can I even *say* to that and..."

"You say thank you," Mrs Midoriya said. She had been watching calmly and patiently. Tears were quietly running down her cheeks but her expression was serene, her voice clear. "You say thank you and accept the gift."

"Thank you," Aizawa said quietly. Nedzu chirped. Aizawa's eyes went wide and Shinsou whispered 'cute' under his breath.

Midoriya fell off the couch as he made a sharp veer left.

"And then you come up with a plan to destroy your enemies so thoroughly that they never come back," Mrs Midoriya continued.

"Mom!" Midoriya yelped.

"Honey, he *blinded you and tried to kill you* . It was his quirk, wasn't it? This Blackout? And there's another one with a foresight quirk?"

"And the two I ran out of town," Shinsou said.

"That is the current working theory, although I assume the mastermind is the one with the foresight. This Blackout must be his most trusted general, or partner perhaps. If our mastermind is very cautious, Blackout might be the voice of the Informant as well."

"From the way Blackout talked, he was the one running the show," Aizawa snorted. "He liked to handle me personally when it came to. Well. Anything," Aizawa swallowed. "He had a very hands-on approach. Sometimes it was like he forgot I was a prisoner and not an employee."

"So would you say you are quite familiar with him?" Nedzu asked. It was more than he had expected. They might be able to start making some more direct inroads on their campaign if Aizawa had something they could use.

"Unfortunately."

"Could you describe him? Give me a profile?" Nedzu asked.

"He's arrogant, but clever enough to back it up. The first time I saw him he was in a room alone with me. He is capable of holding his own against me while I am starved and loosely restrained. Barely. He is relatively strong for a civilian, but the kind of strength that comes from a gym and not combat. My attack caught him by surprise; he did not expect me to take action to his taunts. He relied on mind games to keep me in line.

"Physically, he is taller than me. Over six feet at least, but it's hard to tell because he was fond of looming, and I was often kept seated. Always wore suits. Well fitted, but not top of the line. He was well groomed, always. He preferred colors over blacks and grays. His eyes were dark, hair a lighter brown, worn parted left. His features are symmetrical, but not striking. He would be plain looking if not for his style and personality. He holds himself like a powerful man; tall and confident. He likes to talk, and his voice and phrasing is practiced. He never asked a question he didn't already know the answer to.

"He liked to talk, when he was with me, but it was like he was always telling a joke he knew I wouldn't get. Kept going on about asking the *right questions* and such, though he rarely did more than laugh at mine. He never made a threat he wasn't planning to carry out. He was always surprised or disappointed when I acted against him. Like my imprisonment was to *my benefit* , and I was an unruly child refusing to eat his vegetables. He always acted like he *knew best* . When it came to carrying out threats he made a point to tell me he 'didn't want to do this' and that I had 'forced his hand'. Like a martyr. Like everything he did was *necessary* ."

Aizawa stopped speaking abruptly and took a sip of his tea. Nedzu waited for him to collect himself, but it seemed that he was done.

A man like that... a man like that didn't seem like the kind of man that took orders. Or if he was, he was manipulating those orders to suit him. He had the arrogance of the intelligent; a blind spot that generated confusion when others didn't follow his reasoning. When things were obvious to you, it was disorienting when other people missed them. A man like that went too long without peers to actually challenge his view. He thought he was always right because he was. He had gotten used to seeing ten steps ahead when everyone else barely noticed their own feet. Instead of becoming bitter and lonely about it, he took glee in it.

Aizawa was meant to know his situation was hopeless. When he acted anyway, it was illogical to Blackout and took him by surprise.

Useful, perhaps.

But he was also a man used to leading. To speaking, and being obeyed. To succeeding. *And he had been succeeding for five years* .

Nedzu felt a little sick.

And there was still someone else out there with a foresight quirk. They hadn't even tackled the main threat. Nedzu was sure, though, that Blackout had the key to it all. He was worth focusing on, while they narrowed down the parameters of the foretelling quirk.

"So what about the news headlines?" Midoriya said after it seemed Aizawa was actually finished and not just trying to contain impotent rage. "The informant apparently deals with them consistently."

"The *fucking* news," Aizawa said with more hate than was perhaps warranted.

"Not that I don't agree, sensei, but why are *you* upset about the news?" Midoriya asked.

"Blackout. He. Well. He liked to make threats. Promises. One of the things he liked to tell me was that the instant I escaped he would plaster my face all over the news. A tell-all on an underground hero; history, identity, weaknesses. He'd gloat that he wouldn't have to lift a finger if I left. The criminal underground would do it all for him."

"Uh. Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" Shinsou said. "I didn't... I shouldn't have... Oh man."

"Relax. It's only a threat to me, anything he has on anyone connected to me is long out of date."

"That doesn't make it better!"

"Agreed," Nedzu said. "But if that were the case... it's been a day since you've gone missing. Where are the articles? Have they been buried by the news of Deku's death?"

"Buried, really?" Shinsou whispered.

Mrs Midoriya tapped away on her phone, but gave it up easily when Nedzu gestured for it.

Nothing.

"Two possible scenarios; one, he doesn't know you escaped. Two, he's got a different plan. Or three, he was bluffing," Nedzu said.

"He doesn't bluff," Aizawa said.

"But. This is... interesting data. Given what we know, I think it isn't likely that he's doing something different. His plans have all worked out so far, why change now? He would trust his plan to work, and as you say, he doesn't bluff. Which means the most likely scenario is that he doesn't know.

"Which leads me to the possibility that perhaps your escape attempt was successful because he didn't know in the future," Nedzu said. "The way Shinsou dealt with the guards prevented him from knowing."

"But that can't last!" Midoriya said from the floor. "He would have to know at some point or other that Aizawa escaped? He checks on him personally."

"Unless there is a time limit on the foresight quirk," Shinsou said. Nedzu muffles the high pitched noise in his throat. Midoriya didn't need any help collecting bruises.

"Precisely!"

"A time limit!" Midoriya said. He was too far away for Nedzu to catch his mumbling clearly. He missed the tie bug.

They needed more information.

Wait.

"Shinsou, you said you got a text?"

"Uh, yeah. From Izuku's phone. No emoticons (so obviously not Izu), canned message, ' *Hey, Let's meet up* !'"

Hmm.

"What are the chances that's from Blackout?" Nedzu mused.

"Explain," Aizawa said.

"It is possible that there is someone else targeting Shinsou. The timing though..." Nedzu tucked his nose into both paws, stilling his whiskers. He closed his eyes to reduce external stimulation. The conclusion was in his head already, but he needed to work backward to make sure the logic was sound.

It was risky... very dangerous. But so was Mos Eisu. They had gotten much more out of that ordeal than Asui's 'two sentences', even with the injury to Midoriya. This whole game was dangerous no matter what they did. They just had to make the moves with the biggest possible payoff. If they were going to pay in blood it was going to be worth it.

"It's a trap, and you're going to spring it," Nedzu said, tucking his ears back.

"That's... not an explanation?" Shinsou said.

"And Aizawa is going back to Bakuta," Nedzu said.

"I... just got out," Aizawa said hollowly. Nedzu noticed it was not an immediate 'no'. The faith he had in Nedzu warmed his heart.

"I think the only reason you did is because *he thinks you never left."*

Chapter End Notes

Nedzu: Performance review time!

hires a sabatour, a hacker, a spy to attack the school

Nedzu: The damage cost gets taken out of your yearly increases!

The Plan

Chapter Summary

In which the trap is sprung.

Chapter Notes

You've heard of a good news sandwich? How about a bad one?

1) The only copy of this chapter was sent through the wash.

2) It survived! So here you go, you lucky things

3) I'm not updating next week because I'm going on a trip.

Cya in two weeks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The plan, Shouta told himself, was not to actually give Blackout everything he wanted.

It was to make him *think* he already had it.

The *plan* , Shouta told himself, had a very real shot of getting his eyesight back. *If* it was Blackout that sent Hitoshi the message. *If* Blackout's foresight quirk had a time limit. *If* Blackout wasn't playing a deeper game. *If* Blackout was running the show.

The plan currently had Shouta in a wheelchair, glaring menacingly at nothing as Midoriya Inko tried to maneuver said chair through a side entrance.

The door kept trying to close on them. Inko was trying to stifle her curses. The night air mixed unpleasantly with the sterile miasma of the hospital.

An alarm went off.

"Fuck," said Midoriya's mother. Shouta was surprised into laughing. "Stop it," she said, her voice strangled. "It isn't... it isn't..." she failed to stifle her own chuckles, which only made Shouta laugh harder.

"I'm sorry," he gasped.

"It's not even funny," she said in between giggles.

"It's not," he agreed, still laughing.

"Hey!" came a voice, masculine. "What are you doing out here?"

Inko sobered up enough to answer. "I'm trying to get Mr. Wazai here back to his room," she said,

turning her mirth into an embarrassed waver.

"This is an emergency exit only," the man said, coming closer. He was a little out of breath. Night security for a hospital, most likely. All the action would be in the ER, and he was only walking the perimeter. Not a threat, classified a helpful part of Shouta's mind.

"I didn't think it was alarmed," Inko said. "It didn't go off when we went out?" It hadn't gone off when they initially broke in, she meant, but this explanation is less suspicious.

"The alarm only triggers if the door is left open too long," said their helpful security guard. "You new here?"

"How could you tell?" Inko chuckled nervously. Shouta was never so glad to be treated like part of the décor. Shouta let Inko work her flustered charm into getting the guard to open and hold the door for them.

"Oh thank you so much, he just wanted a little air, you know? And I didn't know where to go so I just saw the exit sign and whoop! Thank you so much," Inko said.

"No problem, ma'am," the guard said. "You really shouldn't be bringing patients outside without checking them out. Hospital policy."

Oh, sure it was. Shouta was sure he'd never been properly checked in.

Hence avoiding the front desk.

And the paper trail.

"Oh, and what if I wanted to check *you* out?" Inko said.

Oh my god was she flirting? *Inko!*

They needed less attention, not more!

The guard chuckled nervously and shuffled back a few steps. "Uh, right," he said. "Well, I should get back to my post. Have a good night ma'am!"

Shouta waited for the door to click shut before face palming.

"Oh don't look like that," Inko said, perfectly calm like she wasn't skirting disaster. "Nothing gets rid of a helpful young man like a middle aged woman showing interest."

"And what if he *returned interest* ?"

"Oh, that wouldn't be so bad, would it?" Inko said.

"You are a demon," Shouta said.

"No one would believe you," she said. Shouta found that some aspects of Midoriya Izuku's personality were making a lot more sense. He shook himself.

It was just as simple slipping him back into his room (prison, cell, cage) as it was for Shinsou to slip him out. Inko blended right in with her scrubs and banal chatter. Before he was ready she was closing the door on his stuffy room and breathing a sigh of relief.

"See? Nothing to it. Izuku worried for nothing," Inko said.

"Never say that. Don't jinx it," Shouta hissed.

"Never took you for the superstitious type."

"And I never took myself for the 'be held captive for two years' type, but here we are."

There was an awkward pause. *Too soon? He really did not understand humor* .

"So... do I just leave you here?" Inko asked. Shouta's breath caught in his throat.

No, don't leave .

"That's the plan," he said instead.

"It feels wrong," Inko said, nudging his chair forward and into a corner. He would have to navigate to the bed himself.

"Someone needs to be out there who knows where I am, and Hitoshi is out walking into a trap. You need to leave," Shouta said. Warmth and perfume wafted past him as Inko passed by and sat on one of the squeaky plastic chairs.

"What if they move you?"

"That's what the tracker is for."

"And if they find it? Disable it?"

"Why are you doing this now? Aren't you supposed to be comforting me? Assuring me that everything is going to work out?"

"Sorry," Inko said quietly. Anxiety bubbled in the back of Shouta's mind. Damn the Midoriyas. They couldn't leave well enough alone. He could almost hear her son going on a tangent about how perhaps there was no alarm from Blackout because these plans they were all banking on failed. That these plans all left Blackout with more resources and leverage than he started. That this was all part of a bigger, deeper plan that entrenched his agenda further.

No. Nedzu and Midoriya had both seen the potential in this plan. Shouta had agreed. It was dangerous and risky, but so was everything else.

This had a shot at working.

This was his best shot at redemption.

"It is necessary," Shouta said. "I'll be alright," he lied.

"Ok," Inko said, standing. He was taken by surprise when she hugged him tight. "Stay safe."

"You know where to go?"

"Like Izuku hasn't confirmed fifteen times already. I know how to get safely out of the city. You know how to reach me if you have to," Inko said. She gave him a final squeeze and pulled away.

Shouta didn't want her to let go.

He stayed seated for a long while after she left. His shirt still smelled of perfume. He eventually got cold enough in his hospital attire to venture toward the bed. It was just as he was settling himself

in, trying to ignore the creeping feeling of being locked in (the door wasn't locked, it wasn't locked, he could just... leave), that he heard the door click quietly open.

It was silent for a moment, his hair raising at the crawling feeling of being watched. And then a sob.

"Sensei," came a watery feminine voice. "It's you!"

"Oh you have got to be kidding me," Shouta said, preparing to thwart a second rescue attempt.

It went like this.

Hitoshi texts ' *Izuku' back 'Is this some sort of gross prank?* '

and in return;

' *I'm not dead, I swear. I need to talk to you, it's important.* '

Sans emotes. Sans terrible punctuation. Sans ten thousand apologetic exclamation marks.

Obviously this person did not have Izuku's texting history. Just his phone, or his number. But this is known. Hitoshi played along.

' *Izu what the fresh hell have you gotten into,* '

' *I can't talk here. We need to meet up!* '

One exclamation mark does not an Izuku make. Hitoshi snorted. Normally he would be much more paranoid. Normally, though, he's not trying to fall for a trap.

' *If it turns out you're actually dead I'm going to kill you,* '

There. Totally in character. Nedzu read over his shoulder and huffed. Izuku whined until somebody explained exactly how they were making fun of him.

Hitoshi was soon sent a location to meet their mysterious imposter. It was a new café (lovely) and it was down the street from the Shihoshi News Offices, which got Nedzu excited enough for Hitoshi to start worrying about his caffeine intake. Apparently, Shihoshi was a popular enough publication that it would be valuable to a manipulator like Blackout. It was also the one that broke the news about Deku's 'death'. Arranging a meeting down the block from the office was just arrogant enough to match their profile of the man.

"So I think I should be the one to go," said Izuku.

"What? No! He thinks you're dead," Hitoshi said.

"He'll kill you," Nedzu added. Hitoshi nodded, remembered the problem with that, and gripped Izuku's head between his hands.

"You. are. not. walking. into. a. fatal. trap," Hitoshi said slowly. You had to be clear with Izuku on some things. Some days it was like training a puppy.

"But he won't be expecting me! There's no telling what he wants with you," Izuku protested.

"Likely the same thing he wants with Aizawa," Nedzu said thoughtfully.

"What?" Hitoshi said, stomach sinking. He dropped his hands from Izuku's face. "My... quirk? What would he even... oh. God."

"See? There is no telling what he'd be able to do if he gets Hitoshi under his thumb, while I'm functionally useless. At worst he might take me as a hostage," Izuku said.

"Him taking you alive is the worse option? Izu. Buddy. No. Nedzu, tell him this is a terrible idea," Hitoshi said.

"It's a terrible idea," Nedzu said dutifully. "You are not walking into a fatal trap." Good, repetition was important with these things. "Also, Blackout capturing Hitoshi is the quickest route to Aizawa getting his eyesight back."

"Wait what?"

Nedzu gave him a moment to recover his dignity, but the joke was on him, *Hitoshi had no remaining dignity* . Nedzu sighed.

"Brainwashing is a powerful quirk. He will want to protect himself from it until he has enough leverage that he can be assured of your cooperation. He will undoubtedly bring you to Aizawa to lock it down until he knows you will not turn against him."

"But... there's still the foresight quirk. How are we any further ahead if I can't use my quirk?"

"You and Aizawa will then need to escape before he can be blinded again. Aizawa only needs access to a drug to reverse his quirk on you, while Blackout will never willingly help us."

"Just like that?" Hitoshi asked.

"No, we will also need to ensure that your escape isn't discovered for seventy two hours," Nedzu said. "Any successful attempt will rely on it."

"But we don't even know the limits of the foresight. It could be something completely different than a time limit!"

"Yes. It could. But these are the facts as we have them now," Nedzu said.

"And if it doesn't work?"

Nedzu sighed. "Then we have another point of data."

This... wasn't the whole plan, was it? This was just *improvisation.* For some reason Hitoshi thought having Nedzu back would make their plans *more* reasonable, not increase the risk taking. He wondered if he ever really knew the principal at all.

He remembered conversations in a wood paneled room before his move into the hero course. Long conversations. For something that had made such an impression on him at the time, he found himself unable to truly recall what they discussed.

Just the outcomes.

"Hitoshi, we're going to be watching your tracker. You need to fall for the trap, yes, but you're not

going to disappear on us. We'll come for you," Izuku said.

"Do you have, like, an estimated chance of this plan working out?"

"Oh, Shinsou, surely you've outgrown probability statistics by now," Nedzu said.

"What do you mean, *outgrown* !? You used to give them out like *candy* ."

"They do add a degree of professionalism to a plan, don't they? I assure you, they are simply a placebo for confidence. No plan has any guarantee of success."

Great.

"We could just... not do this," Hitoshi said. "Walk away." Nedzu was already shaking his head.

"We could," Nedzu said. "We could then avoid every obvious trap from this point on. Play the game on the back foot until he's able to engineer one we *don't* see coming. Give him time to come up with something that will utterly defeat us. Or we can use this obvious trap as a cover, allowing us to get close and, if we're lucky, come out a few steps ahead."

"Lucky," Hitoshi whispered.

"We've already had some luck," said Izuku. "You've made the most headway against him of anyone. It's still possible that there's something about your quirk that counteracts his predictions. You of all people have the best shot at this."

"Izu... if he. If he gets me to use my quirk for him...?" Hitoshi felt sick thinking about it. He was always so *carefully* in control. Always so aware of the damage he could do. For that power to be beyond him... to be in the hands of a *villain* ...

"We'll come for you, Hitoshi," Izuku said, hand reaching out slowly until it bumped his shoulder. "You're not going to be alone. He's not going to risk you having your quirk until he *knows* he can control you. We'll get you out before it comes to that."

"And what are the chances of that?" Hitoshi asked with a twisted smile.

"Eighty seven percent," Nedzu said, holding eye contact. It was the kindest lie anyone had ever told him.

It goes like this.

Hitoshi is walking down the street to the café. The air is soft with spring and the scent of flowers. People walk by with a bounce in their step. People are laughing as much as they are talking.

It is far too crowded for Hitoshi's level of comfort.

Far too colorful.

Too loud.

Working as an underground hero often means working the late night shifts. It often means seeing people divided into the two easy boxes of 'frightened' or 'frightening'. His work takes him to the

areas where people shouldn't be, or don't want to be. Every step closer to another person is a threat, every step away an invitation.

It's not easy, it's not pretty, but it's simple in a way that walking this daytime street is not. It's honest, in a way this bustling street is not.

He was never meant to be one of them.

One of the crowd.

Today, though, he blends in. He's wearing a bright hoodie from Izuku's collection (size doesn't stop Izuku from bidding on hero mech. Doesn't stop him from leaving them all at his mom's house either, like some sort of guilty stockpile of useless things he can't bear to either part with or acknowledge). His hair is combed back, Izuku's mom has powdered his face and he has never felt less like himself.

He catalogs the faces around him (all so similar, all so human, they blur together), looking for suits and confidence.

Nothing catches his eye.

Most people are wearing casual clothing caught somewhere between the shift in seasons. Many of them are shopping, several are meeting friends. This stretch of road is a mix of business and pleasure. Two small-time heroes are patrolling down the other side of the street. Hitoshi is not sure whether that is helpful or not.

He tracks their progress anyway.

While he's distracted Hitoshi bumps into someone, knocking them off balance. He reacts too late and fails to catch the slim teenager before they impact the ground. The kid doesn't catch himself either; his hands are both firmly wedged in his pockets.

"Shit! I'm sorry, are you alright?" he asks, bending down. The teenager, instead of lifting his head, seems to curl further into himself.

" 'm okay," the kid says so, so quietly. Hitoshi has to lean forward to catch it. Around them the crowd parts and continues its bustle uninterrupted (uncaring). Hitoshi reaches out a hand to help the kid to his feet. The kid pulls one hand from his pocket and tentatively takes his and he helps him up. Hitoshi's breath catches when the kid actually looks up.

Dead, blank eyes and a slack face. Hitoshi is shocked into dropping the kid's hand. He takes a step back.

Between blinks, the kid disappears. The passing crowd swallows him up and Hitoshi is left opening and closing his hands like it will untangle the strange tailspin his thoughts are left in.

Hitoshi hates crowds.

He has also lost sight of the two heroes patrolling the street.

Damn.

Keep moving .

He is only a little further down the street, passing a bank, when someone shouts. His first thought

is one of annoyance. He's still half a block away from the café and he's already on edge.

His second thought cannot be put into words, but has him shielding a woman and her child beside him with his body before he's even clocked the threat. People run outwards, onto the street, away from the bank. A cascade of skidding and tripping and screaming.

He thinks it's a pretty big reaction to a kid with a gun, but then he's never felt the civilian illusion of safety. Currently the crowd is pushing and shoving and trampling away from the gun, preventing the heroes from coming any closer. Police have materialized from *somewhere* already, and instead of calming the public seem to just be stirring up the hysteria as people further away notice that this is serious.

Hitoshi stands like a boulder in the stream and faces the threat.

It's the same kid he had bumped into earlier.

He looks just as blank as he did before, but now the kid stands with a gun and a hostage, a little girl no older than four, held close.

Shit.

"Hey kid," he calls out, power coiling being his voice. "What are you doing?"

Instead of responding (respond, respond, come on respond) the kid just looks at him. Eyes blank. Face slack. The hostage whimpers. Hitoshi raises his hands in front of him placatingly. He makes his stance wider, a shield for the people behind him.

"Hey, hey, it's alright, ok? Everything will turn out just fine. What's your name?" Hitoshi projects his voice confidently, but retains the soothing cadence that has so often coaxed an involuntary response. He can see even from here the shaking hand holding the gun. It isn't being aimed at anything yet, but his knuckles are white from his grip. Despite the blank face this kid is *terrified* .

No color in the lips, hair wet with sweat (it wasn't a hot day), legs locked rigidly. Hitoshi knows the signs of a person on the edge.

"It's going to be ok, alright?" he says. The questions need to be better than this. The kid is panicking. He needs to provoke a response that requires no thought. A yes or no. Something simple, but verbal.

"Do you need help?" No response other than a hurried blink. (a flinch?)

Around them, the empty circle widens. Police are beginning to form a perimeter. Hitoshi needs to solve this before the police take over (before it escalates). His quirk is perfect for this, but they don't know that. He can't really tell them either, not without giving himself away.

He needs the kid to respond soon.

"Can I come closer?" Hitoshi asks. The kid shakes his head slightly, not looking away. The gun comes up as a warning, aiming out into the crowd.

Damn.

Hitoshi drops to his knees slowly, maintaining eye contact. He will lie down on the ground if he has to, so long as that kid keeps looking at him. So long as he doesn't push the kid into doing something regrettable.

"I'm not coming any closer. Is this alright?" Hitoshi asks. The hostage whimpers as the kid tightens his hold. The girl is crying now, looking between Hitoshi and the police officers.

"What do you want?" Hitoshi asks. The kid refuses to so much as grumble in response. What the hell was going on? No one made this much of a fuss without a message or a demand or something. The kid is just standing there, scared out of his mind, staring at him.

It was like....

Oh, Hitoshi was a fool. It was a quirk, it had to be. Hitoshi risks a glance around him at the crowd. Police officers were still fighting their way forward, coordinating on their radios. One of the heroes has launched themselves into the sky, but they hesitate. Hostage situations are delicate. At a glance he can't find anyone suspicious. Not all quirks require the user to be present, but it was common enough to be worth looking for.

When Hitoshi looks back at the kid something has changed. The set of his jaw, or the steadiness of his hand. He aims the gun more surely, somewhere out into the crowd, hand flexing on the trigger.

"Don't shoot!" Hitoshi yells. There's a brief moment where Hitoshi hopes, but all the kid does is lower the gun slightly (going from lethal to grievous injury) and fires.

In the wake of that startling blast the first noise Hitoshi registers is a wail quickly climbing into a scream. A man had been shot in the leg. The crowd folds around him as a couple quick thinking civilians drop to put pressure on the wound.

The second is the kid, crumpled to the ground, gun dropped like a hot iron. "What have I done? What did I do?" The hostage is crawling away, bawling her eyes out, reaching for Hitoshi. Hitoshi curls an arm under her and pulls her around behind him. She clings to the back of his shirt. He hopes she is completely hidden.

"Hey kid, look at me," Hitoshi says to the gunner. The teenager lifts his eyes and Hitoshi is struck by disorientingly blank eyes on a grief stricken face. Was he still under control of the quirk? Fighting it? "Are you ok?" Hitoshi says, willing the kid to respond.

"I'm not-"

Finally.

The kid's face goes slack once more, but this time Hitoshi is in control. He breathes out steadily, trying not to let the relief drop his guard.

Someone in the crowd screams; "It's him! He's the one doing it! Stop him!"

Hitoshi is suddenly knocked to the ground, several hands pinning his arms, a heavy weight on his legs. He goes to twist out of the hold but someone is already there shoving his head back down. He doesn't know which way is up or what's going on but he needs to get out. Somewhere the little girl is crying and he doubles his efforts.

Three more dull impacts have him solidly pinned to the ground. He can barely move a finger. He starts to ask a question when a cloth is shoved in his mouth. He has to concentrate on breathing not to gag on it.

Above him he catches bits of conversation.

"*... saw him knock the kid over earlier. ..*"

"*... told him to shoot ...*"

"*... he was going for a second shot ...*"

And directly in his ear he is being informed that he is under arrest. That he must go quietly. That they didn't know what he was trying to accomplish, but it was over now.

Arrested .

He is being *arrested as a villain .*

Uncontrollable laughter bubbles up and chokes on the gag. He tries to stifle the giggles and hopes they come out more as angry grunts than sobs.

"*... is he laughing? That's disgusting. ..*"

Well shit. He closes his eyes to try and get a hold of himself, but it only manages to stoke the fear of being crushed under who knows how many bodies.

Handcuffs click into place around his wrists. Around him helpful witnesses continue to deliver damning testimony after damning testimony. ' *I saw him use his quirk* ', ' *Isn't that the brainwashing kid from UA?'* , ' *Did you see him controlling that poor kid with the gun* ?'.

They are making a terrible mistake. He's not the one who did this. It's a scene straight from his nightmares. Was this some sort of horrible prank? He's hauled to his feet, the crowd is under much better control now. Paramedics are helping the man who was shot.

Oh, he realizes. *This* is the trap.

It will go like this.

Hitoshi will be sitting in a locked room. His hands will be locked to the table, and his arms will go cold from resting on it. He will be too scared to remove the tape from his mouth. Only once the smell of the police station and shitty coffee are firmly marinated in his psyche will the door open.

And in will walk a man in a burgundy suit.

Chapter End Notes

fucking /in-tense/

The Monologue

Chapter Summary

Every good villain needs a monologue. And everyone else digs themselves in deeper.

Izuku fought for control as Nedzu angrily narrated the chaos in the street. They were tucked in a corner between shop facades and Nedzu had climbed up the side of the building for a better view. Izuku wanted nothing more than to dash out there and pull his friend away, but they couldn't interfere with the trap.

The *fucking* trap.

Which seemed wouldn't be taking place at the cafe, but instead a jail cell. Izuku grit his teeth. Hitoshi had worked so hard to be seen as something more than a villain waiting to happen and now he'd talked him into walking into... into *this* .

It didn't help that had Izuku been the one to take his place, this would never have happened. Sure he was supposed to be dead, but he *also* couldn't be arrested for quirk use. It would have thrown the whole thing off course!

(Nothing would stop the gunman from just shooting Izuku either, and Nedzu and Hitoshi had been very clear that they wouldn't be happy if that happened)

Izuku wished he could be doing more than hiding in a corner gritting his teeth. Nedzu dropped back down onto his shoulder as the last siren faded away. The murmur of the crowd picked up to normal levels and Izuku...

Just waited for direction.

"Now what?" he asked Nedzu. He could hear the clicking of Nedzu's nubby claws on the phone. The plastic casing rested against Izuku's head.

"Now we wait. We can't follow him to the police station, we will need to wait for him to be transferred."

"Won't it be kind of conspicuous for us to just... loiter here? In the corner?"

"It would certainly be worse if we were to walk into a public building," Nedzu said. "I would prefer not to show up on the cameras just yet."

"I don't like this," Izuku said.

"It's not ideal."

"Shouldn't we be... doing something? Something more?"

Nedzu hummed. More tapping. Whiskers flicked against his hair. Nedzu's tail was tight around his upper arm. Izuku strained his hearing to see if he could pick up anything useful from passing conversations, but people moved on too quickly.

Someone threw a coin at his face.

"People suck," Izuku said, letting the coin hit the ground. *He* wasn't going to pick it up.

"Indeed," said Nedzu, who seemed not to be paying attention to him. To be fair, Izuku wasn't doing anything super important other than serving as a roost for Nedzu. "And I think it's time we moved on, too many people are giving us second glances."

"Is it my face?" Izuku couldn't help but ask. Nedzu patted his head.

"No, it's not your face. Your face is completely obscured." In *bandages* . "I think people are starting to notice me, which is inconvenient. We need to change locations, and I'd like to have an angle on the Shihoshi entrances, now that we aren't watching for Shinsou."

"Is he okay?"

"He's in the police station." Which... wasn't really an answer. Correction, that wasn't the answer Izuku *wanted* . "No, we can't go to the police station."

"How the hell are we going to get him out then!?"

"You know as much as I do, Midoriya. I know it isn't ideal-"

"Ideal? It isn't even *acceptable.* Anything could be happening to him..." Izuku forcefully cut himself off. His voice was getting too loud. He needed to be calm. Be *rational* . They knew they were sending Hitoshi into a trap (he knew) but the reality was proving harder to accept than the theory.

"What is this really about?" Nedzu asked.

"What is it- *really* ? No. I knew this was a risky plan. I *knew* that. But I also thought we weren't going to be more than a couple blocks away. The police station is two train stations away. We aren't in a position to help *when* things go sideways. And now you want to *stake out* the news office building. While my friend is in danger."

"He is not in mortal danger," Nedzu said.

"He's not safe either. He's counting on us to be a safety net and we aren't even in the same district."

"We have an opportunity here," Nedzu said quietly. "We are right next to Shihoshi, right after an event meant to draw Blackout out. We have a chance to confirm that Shihoshi is a place of interest and maybe even a little more. If Blackout is drawn out... well. He'll be leaving his office unattended."

Izuku had forgotten what Nedzu was like. Five steps ahead and so, so clever. It was different, though, when his friend was on the line. So much harder to be objective when all he wanted to do was make everything okay. Hitoshi would be so *scared.* Sure, he was a full fledged hero, but this scenario was right out of his short list of nightmares.

"I know you want to be there for Shinsou, but we need to think ahead. If we simply rescue him from this trap we are no further ahead than we were when we started. We need to make the most of our sacrifices, leave nothing to waste," Nedzu said.

"Hitoshi isn't a *sacrifice* ," Izuku hissed.

"No. No he isn't," Nedzu paused. "We do have an opportunity here. We could learn a lot from Shihoshi. But. If you want to wait outside the police station so that we are ready in the unlikely event of an emergency... We'll go."

"You make me sound unreasonable."

"It was not... It was not my intention. I really think that we could gain something from Shihoshi, but we're a team. You have a say in this as well. If you feel strongly enough that acting as a safety net for Shinsou is our highest priority, I will concede. My plan isn't safe, and I need you to be completely on board to make this work. It's your call."

And now Izuku *felt* like he was being unreasonable. Nedzu was right, *of course he was right.* This was the reason why they'd been spinning their wheels without him. Why they had needed to find him. Nedzu thought differently, even in the heat of the moment. They'd been counting on him knowing what to do and here was Izuku, *questioning* his plan.

His very likely *good* plan.

It sucked that the right thing to do felt like betrayal. Izuku took a big breath and held it.

"Okay," he sighed. "Ok, let's go see what Shihoshi has for us."

Nedzu directed Izuku up the side of the building, hopefully using a route that wasn't garnering attention. Thankfully he heard no excited chatter from the streets. The buildings in this part of town mostly connected together so Izuku didn't need to make any leaps of faith. Nedzu had him settle down against sun warmed concrete and the metal railing of a ladder. Izuku closed his eyes and rested, trusting Nedzu to do the actual surveillance.

That was one perk of being blind. He couldn't do stakeouts anymore. He supposed it would be possible to sit in a location and listen. Get a dirty enough outfit, sit on the street and you disappear almost as effectively as Toru.

Unfortunately, not being able to look at anything was *really boring* . After Izuku's fifth sigh, Nedzu started a running monologue of all that he was seeing. A kid losing his toy, people milling around the bank where Hitoshi was taken, people sweeping the sidewalks. As Nedzu got comfortable he also started adding in commentary about who was late for a meeting or fighting with their spouse.

"And *that* is a man in a burgundy suit leaving the Shihoshi building," Nedzu said. Izuku sat up.

"Blackout?"

"That's an overly quick judgment, but yes. His description... matches his profile. He's getting into a cab. I'll see if I can follow the license plate through the city."

"You can do that? I thought that access to the cameras was regulated," Izuku said.

"Oh it is," Nedzu said, tapping away at the phone.

"But you can just bring it up on a phone? That seems... insecure."

"You've never tried? I'm surprised."

"Yeah well everything I did as a hero was always scrutinized. I had to show my work for *everything* . You would not believe the paperwork I had to do just for explaining a simple logical deduction. It

was like they thought I was cheating and were determined to catch me out... so. I couldn't *actually* cheat. I guess it makes me a better hero? Mostly it was just annoying," Izuku said.

"And that's why I let everyone assume I have an intelligence quirk."

"Fucking quirks," Izuku muttered. Nedzu chuckled.

"And he's arrived at the police station. I think that's clear enough. Assuming his business takes him at least an hour (and it will take fifteen minutes to check in alone, assuming he doesn't bypass security) we have an hour and a bit minimum before he can return. Let's move."

Izuku rolled to his feet, flipping Nedzu up onto his shoulder. Together they made their way down and across the street. Avoiding the lobby, they were able to sneak in after an employee went in from their break. They were able to skip the first floor to the fourth, taking the stairs and coaxing the lock. They slipped into the first washroom they found and Nedzu directed him into a stall.

Oh memories. Feet up in the seat, careful not to touch the walls, a spare bit of tape over the automatic flush.

"Alright, this ceiling is your typical drop ceiling, so it's perfect. I'll be able to get around unseen no problem," Nedzu said.

"And... I'll just stay here?" Izuku asked.

"I won't be long," Nedzu said.

"Do you even know where you're going?"

"Top floor, west side of the building."

"What? How?"

"Educated guess. A man like Blackout is going to take the best spot for himself. West is the most attractive view from here. As for how, this building is old but has a very new climate system. There's plenty of space for someone like me to slip through, if I'm quick enough."

"What if something goes wrong? What if you get delayed? How will I know?"

Nedzu rummaged around in Izuku's pockets and found something that he proceeded to fiddle with. He pushed the object into Izuku's hands. It was the little All Might clock (kept muted, for now, such a thoughtful feature).

"I've set it for an hour for now. It's not muted, so you will need to keep it muffled for the top of the hour which is in twenty minutes. If I'm not back in one hour, something has gone wrong. I will have your phone with me. Leave, get to safety, and call it. If nothing else, it will have the location feature active."

"I don't like this," Izuku said.

"Neither do I, but I prefer it to living in captivity. So. Please stay here. You are my exit strategy."

"Please be careful," Izuku said.

"Plus Ultra," said Nedzu. Which... really didn't bode well for being careful. Izuku reached out and pulled Nedzu to him. Nedzu tucked his head under Izuku's chin and accepted the hug. He wasn't sure if the principal was just humoring him or not, but he squeezed back as tightly as Izuku.

"I'll be here, go," Izuku said. Nedzu nodded and sprung off the back of Izuku's shoulders. A muffled shifting of ceiling tiles and he was gone. Izuku tucked the little clock close to his belly and buried his head in his arms.

This was going to be the longest sixty minutes of his life. He hoped they were doing the right thing.

"You said they were blanks!" the kid yelled. The man sighed quietly and rubbed his temples. He had known there would be a bit of... *drama* after the whole thing, but it was still irritating.

"It needed to be realistic, including your reaction," the man said, smoothing his voice into something more appropriate for bedtime stories. The kid's breathing didn't slow down.

"I could have... I could have *killed* somebody! I could have..." the kid choked and heaved. The man nudged the trash can closer to him. No sense ruining the small office he had commandeered from the police chief. The kid needed a quiet place to come to terms with things before the next part. The man wouldn't have time to comfort him for a while after this.

"It's not your fault. You were just doing what I told you to," the man said. The kid looked up at him finally. He was still wearing those creepy contacts. "And take those things out of your eyes, they're not helping."

"But you... you knew! You... *you asked the questions* ," the kid wailed, rubbing at his eyes. He was going to scratch them at this rate.

"Yes. I asked the questions, and this was the answer. You don't need to take these burdens on yourself. That's what I'm here for," the man soothed. "It's all me. I'm calling the shots, I'm shouldering the blame. This isn't your fault, kid."

"But I... I shot him... just. *Squeezed the trigger...! If I hadn't been aiming at his legs...!* " the kid was back to sobbing again. Big intakes of air shook his shoulders. The man placed a careful hand on one of them, drawing the kid into a side hug. If he was careful, he might not get tears and snot all over his suit.

"Hey kid, it's okay. You're fine, but I really have to make a call right now to make sure you stay that way, alright?" The kid nodded sullenly. "Look, it's all going to work out in the end. Remember how this all started? It wasn't a cake walk, but we made it through. You just need to trust that I know what I'm doing. Just... trust me, ok?" The kid moved away, curling up in a chair. He really hoped this wasn't going to turn into a long sulk. He patted the kid's shoulder and went to make a call to Yugo.

It was good that he had found some place quiet, because the story he got from Yugo raised his blood pressure to a non-hideable degree.

"What do you mean you're at the airport!?"

Hitoshi wasn't sure what he had been expecting for a trap, but this wasn't it. It felt uncomfortably complete. It sure as hell didn't feel like they were making any headway at all, just... giving Blackout what he wanted. A man had been shot in order to frame Hitoshi. There wasn't any going back now. Hitoshi hoped to hell that this would give them something they could use, otherwise he was just going to...

Eighty seven percent. Nedzu had said *eighty seven percent.* Those were... good odds. It was also a *lie* , but Hitoshi buried that thought under a healthy dose of denial.

So. Now all Hitoshi had to do was figure out what was going on and turn this to their advantage. If it wasn't Blackout, perhaps it was someone who could be turned against him.

He just had to do this while being interrogated(?).

As a suspect in a shooting.

While he couldn't say a word.

Easy.

The tape around his mouth itched. He wasn't about to fiddle with it and risk it being replaced with something worse, but it was a test of patience. He also had to look like he could be controlled... like he was willing to cooperate.

But not *too* willing.

Hitoshi became aware of a muffled yelling that seemed to be coming from behind the mirror on the other side of the room. It was quiet enough to be barely audible, but it rumbled under the quiet unmistakably. A sudden thud against the mirror made Hitoshi jump.

Someone was watching him, and someone was *angry* .

Hitoshi hunched his shoulders and prepared for...

Well. He counted to ten and slowed his breathing. That was about as much as he could do with what he had.

It was quiet for a while before the door finally opened. In walked a man in a burgundy suit, folder tucked under his arm. He was relatively unremarkable but well groomed. One shoulder had a darker wet spot on it. *Odd place for a stain* .

"Well, you've certainly got yourself into something, haven't you?" the man said, smiling. He flopped the folder onto the table.

Hitoshi shrugged. Who was this guy? He wasn't police, that was for sure. *Legal?*

The hero commission? But no, those guys weren't allowed a *personality* , not to mention burgundy suits.

Had Blackout sent him?

"You know, usually I'd ask for your side of the story, but I think we'll skip past that point, shall we?" The man flipped the folder open. He read the first page as though he hadn't bothered to prepare before walking in the door. "Shinsou Hitoshi. Quirk, Brainwashing. Voice based."

The man flicked his eyes over the tape on Hitoshi's mouth.

"Which has been accounted for, I see. Very powerful. Hero, underground, license currently *suspended* ," the man said. He lounged in the chair like it was comfortable. Hitoshi tried to read the paper upside down, but the folder was snapped shut. "It would certainly make sense that the license was suspended *after* today, but I see that it has been that way for over a month now."

Well, that answered that one. Hitoshi had already been operating under the assumption that he was on his own. *God knows* the commission never had his back before.

"It seems they've got you listed as 'missing'," the man said. He met Hitoshi's eyes. "So where have you been, *Hitoshi?"*

Hitoshi kept up eye contact for an uncomfortable few seconds and then very deliberately shrugged. The man chuckled.

"What I find interesting is that you are not listed as missing in action. *They* think you've gone rogue," the man said.

Well. *They were not wrong* . Hitoshi had only planned on following licensing guidelines for as long as they aligned with his needs. Ever since Nedzu disappeared most of his peers had been disillusioned by the legal hero system. It wasn't really possible for the hero commission to disappoint him because he already expected the worst.

Hence the success of the vigilante network.

Hitoshi shrugged again. He had no idea what this guy wanted yet, or who he was. He'd keep his cards close to his chest.

"You seem awfully unconcerned, for a hero," the man said. He leaned forward. "Hero licenses are a precious resource. It would have gone a long way towards clearing up any... misunderstandings from today."

Oh, this was *blackmail* . Hitoshi frowned at him, long practiced at getting all the emotion into his eyebrows.

"Oh you have questions, I can see that," the man said. "But I have you at a disadvantage."

No shit. It wasn't like the guy couldn't give him a *pen and paper* or anything.

Almost like the disadvantage was intentional.

Hitoshi rolled his eyes.

"Let's start simple," the man said. "Like, why are you here?"

Hitoshi stared.

"Oh, not why you were arrested, of course. There are many eyewitness accounts of that, not to mention a man in hospital and the traumatized kid who shot him." Hitoshi winced. "Oh no, that is all rather self-explanatory. Let's talk about why you were walking down that street in the first place."

The man pulled a cellphone from his pocket.

A highly decorated cell phone with many hero stickers lovingly applied. Hitoshi would know who that belonged to even if he'd never seen it before. His breath caught in his throat. His first instinct

was to stifle the show of emotion, but... *Izuku was alive* . Hitoshi was meant to *think* he was dead.

Play it up.

Hitoshi stared at the man, dropping the frown. Disbelief. *Make him spell it out.*

"I'm afraid Deku won't be joining us today," the man said, eyebrows quirked into a sympathetic expression. "The ruse was an unfortunate necessity, even if it was clever." The man watched him, waiting for the implications to sink in. Hitoshi kept his face open and vulnerable, but didn't tip into grief yet.

"I know it isn't what you want to hear, and I apologize for getting your hopes up. I'm afraid your friend is actually dead," the man said, tugging a piece of newsprint from the folder. He pushed it towards Hitoshi.

It was that horrible article. They'd dug up one of the more gruesome press photos of Deku after a fight; his smile like broken porcelain, left half of his face covered in blood. Izuku *hated* those photos. It made him look terrifying and shattered all at once. Hitoshi let the tears prick his eyes. He started to shake his head, avoiding looking at the article.

Even knowing it was a fabrication didn't stop the echo of grief from rising.

The man got out of his seat and walked around the table next to Hitoshi, getting far too close. He perched on top of the table and rested a hand in a comforting gesture on Hitoshi's shoulder. It made his skin crawl. And he couldn't move away because the handcuffs were linked to a table. Hitoshi leaned back as far as he could but that just left him looking up at the man.

"I know," the man said. "I know." Like he actually cared about any of this, like that hand on his shoulder was anything other than a threat. "It is hard to lose a friend."

The man leaned forward until his mouth was close to Hitoshi's ear.

"But I couldn't have him interfering anymore," the man whispered. His hand came up, briefly touching the side of Hitoshi's face and the room went dark.

Hitoshi was not sure how you would classify the sound he made, but it wouldn't be on a list of dignified ones. By the time he got his breathing back under control, his vision returned and the man was once again sitting across the table from him like he had never moved.

Fuck! Just... fuck.

What the hell was *that?*

Logically, Hitoshi knew *that* was a threat. The man had admitted to having Deku killed, to sending the text... and had demonstrated his quirk in the most *fucking dramatic display* he'd ever had the displeasure to experience.

Fuck.

The man, *Blackout him-fucking-self* , dropped the falsely genial expression he'd been wearing the whole time and now he watched Hitoshi with a calculating expression.

"I'm sure you must understand the position that you are in, now," he said. Hitoshi stared at him in disbelief. Aizawa wasn't kidding, Blackout was hands on. *And* arrogant.

Aizawa had survived two years of this?

"But perhaps I need to spell it out for you. You've had a difficult day, and seem to be slow on the uptake.

"Unless I intervene, you are going to jail. Your quirk is powerful, so it would be a more unpleasant experience than your typical villain. You'll drink through a straw the rest of your life," the man said.

Fuck.

"Your friend is dead, you are no longer a hero in good standing, and as far as I can tell, and I can tell a lot..." Blackout leans forward. "Nobody knows where you are."

"You are alone in a bad position," the man said, leaning back. He stared at Hitoshi thoughtfully. Hitoshi had no idea what he read on his face, but Blackout relaxed back into a more casual tone and posture. "But everyone deserves a chance."

And here we go.

"You know the interesting thing about underground heroes?" He paused like Hitoshi could answer. "They live in the gray. With no public watching, they do as they please." Not how it worked, but *sure* . Hitoshi... *mostly* did that, but he was more vigilante at this point than hero so who knows. "No public recognition, no condemnation. Only the work.

"They see the world as it is, in all its rotten truth, and still they chose to try to fight it. Day after day they struggle against it, knowing it's all going to be the same again tomorrow. Some of them continue through sheer bloody mindedness. Their focus becomes so narrow they can bull their way through, no thought beyond the now. Others...

"Others just can't see a better way. Others just... need to be shown the bigger picture. *Shown how to really make a difference* ."

Oh man, he thinks he's a revolutionary . This was no Giran, seeking power for power's sake, dangerous like a cornered animal.

Blackout had a mission. A plan.

"You've already taken the first step; eschewing the commission's authority. You know that if you're going to fix a society you can't be *bound by its rules* ."

Hitoshi let the skepticism creep into his expression. *Keep talking, villain.*

"Rules set by short sighted greedy people who can't plan past the end of the week, let alone build an adequate future for the country. It takes someone who can really see the shape of things to make decisions that will guide us to a brighter future," Blackout said, smiling and righteous.

The real kicker was that Blackout wasn't wrong. Things were fucked, even before Nedzu left. Society was cruel and kept digging itself further down, systematically creating the very villains that threatened its foundation.

But for someone who had listened to Izuku rant about society as long as Hitoshi had...

Well.

Blackout's arguments were *grade school.*

Hitoshi grunted.

"I don't expect you to really understand just yet. You don't need to understand everything from one conversation. You are in a bad position, emotional, and you have had a *day* . I would never expect more from you than you are capable of providing."

Thanks.

"I think we can really help each other. Our relationship doesn't need to be antagonistic. All I need from you today is a promise to try. Just, *hear me out.* Listen. Have a real conversation. Do you think you can do that for me?"

Hitoshi stared. He looked down and away, counted to eighteen, flicked a glance back at Blackout. The man was still watching him. Hitoshi let his glance skitter away and counted to thirteen. Closed his eyes and nodded.

That should be convincing, right? Not too quick, not too stubborn?

"Wonderful," said Blackout. He pulled out a phone (black, sleek, new) and sent a quick text. "There's just one little thing we need to take care of before we can have a real conversation."

Blackout gathered up the folder (just a prop, Hitoshi guessed. The man was dramatic) and stood. He pulled what looked like a cigarette case out and fiddled with the lid. In a couple minutes there was a quiet knock on the door. Blackout opened it wide and one of the goons from the hospital rolled in with Aizawa. The guy left him there and resumed his post outside, presumably.

Hitoshi made a muffled sound. Blackout gave him a look.

"There would be benefits, of course, to working with me. Once I know I can trust you we wouldn't need to take such... barbaric measures. You could really help his quality of life." Hitoshi just stared at Aizawa like he hadn't seen him in two years.

"What the hell is going on?" Aizawa growled.

"Oh you'll see soon enough. Cheer up, Shouta, today should be a treat," Blackout said.

"You wouldn't know a treat if you were standing in the middle of a candy shop," Aizawa said.

"Oh you are in fine form today. Not everything is about you. Now," Blackout said, pulling a little needle from the case. "Here's how it's going to go. I'm going to give you back your sight and give you a few minutes to adjust. Don't do anything reckless."

"Never in my life," Aizawa muttered.

"You're awfully mouthy for a medical asset," Blackout said, flicking the syringe before popping it into his own arm. He shuddered as the effects took hold, radiating a crackling energy that set Hitoshi's teeth on edge. "Oh it never gets old."

Blackout reached out and touched Aizawa's head. Immediately he shut his eyes as the glare from the overhead lights caught up with him. Hitoshi watched, carefully regulating his breathing, as Aizawa adjusted.

Finally their eyes met.

"Shinsou," Aizawa said. " *Hitoshi.* "

Hitoshi just nodded, vision going watery.

"Fuck," Aizawa said. He looked at Blackout. " *Fuck* . No."

Blackout, eyes bright with power, merely watched with a smug look. *Cat who caught the canary.*

"Yes," Blackout said. He tilted his head towards Hitoshi. "You know what you need to do."

" *No* ," Aizawa said, angry now.

"I had hoped," Blackout started, "That Hitoshi and I might have a good working relationship. Merely a hope, you understand. It isn't necessary. I only need his voice. His power. We could do so much more together, Hitoshi, you understand. You could have a say in things. But I only *need* your quirk, and there are many paths to that goal."

"He'll never willingly work for you," Aizawa growled.

"Not really your call, is it?" Blackout said. "I thought you would have wanted the best for one of your students."

"I... I *do* , but..." Aizawa "Let him go. You've already got me. I'll... I'll cooperate. You won't... I won't fight."

Blackout laughed.

"You still don't really understand the situation that you're in, that *he's* in, do you?" he said. "He's here as a criminal. You already cooperate with me. You have nothing to offer that I don't already have. I think you've adjusted enough."

Blackout set a second syringe on the table. Aizawa made no move to touch it.

"Standard rules apply. You will only have a few moments before you pass out," Blackout said. Aizawa met Hitoshi's eyes. Hitoshi was momentarily taken aback by the fire in them.

Aizawa flicked his eyes to the empty corner of the room behind Blackout and back to Hitoshi.

The hell was that ... Hitoshi couldn't reach the corner. His bewildered gaze made Aizawa frown. Aizawa took the syringe and looked at it for a moment before he rolled into arms reach of Hitoshi. Aizawa rolled up his sleeve and prepared the needle. He looked at Hitoshi, just looked at him for a moment. It was a question. Hitoshi had no idea he was being asked, but he nodded anyway. Aizawa took a breath.

"Fuck it," he said, jabbing the needle in his arm.

Then he launched himself at Blackout.

Live on TV

Chapter Summary

Izuku isn't very good at waiting in one place and then things get out of hand.

Chapter Notes

Please enjoy this humble offering of melodrama.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku felt like he'd been hiding in the stall well beyond the hour they had. He had to have faith, though, in that little All Might alarm clock. It hadn't called out the hour yet.

He was going to be here for a long time.

Luckily, people didn't expect you to make conversation in the toilet. Well. Not most people. But. It was equally awkward for *everyone* , not just Izuku. He took some comfort in that. You could be as awkward as you liked in the toilet, toilets were awkward. Special bonus, he didn't have to worry about eye contact.

He hoped Nedzu figured something out. He hoped nobody needed to use the washroom for the next hour. He hoped Hitoshi was okay. He wanted to know if Hitoshi was still at the police station, or if he'd been moved. How quickly were they going to be able to respond? Hitoshi knew they were coming for him, so it wouldn't be like...

(*it wouldn't be like it was for Nedzu*)

Izuku wished he could have been left in a gym or something. Weight lifting and exercise always helped calm his thoughts. Maybe if he... but no, the heavy breathing would be weird and he didn't want anyone to know he was there at all. His thoughts were interrupted by the door opening and someone walking in on light feet. Izuku held his breath.

They didn't seem in a rush to use the facilities. They paced from one corner of the bathroom to the other. As they came closer Izuku could hear them singing under their breath;

"Oo-oo-rah, oo-oo-ra-ka-ka-ka. Oo-ooh, yah! Oo-Oo-ra-ka-ka-ka," she chanted. Izuku felt a welling of embarrassed relief.

"O-o-chako?" he whispered. She paused her theme song. *Shit he shouldn't have said anything, what if it wasn't her? He was terrible at hiding in bathrooms, Nedzu couldn't take him anywhere* .

Quick steps and suddenly they were knocking on the stall door. "Deku? Is that you?" she whispered. Izuku unlatched the door and suddenly he had an armful of Ochako. The stall door banged shut. "Deku what the hell are you doing here?" she asked.

"Uh, hiding, so if you could..."

Ochako instantly made herself weightless, latched the door shut and tucked herself to Izuku's arm. Her other hand came up to check his face.

"Damn, Deku, what have you been doing? Shouto said you were alive, thank god, but it looks like it was a close thing. Why the hell are you hiding in a bathroom stall *here* ? Didn't like the articles?" she asked rapid fire, blessedly quiet and close to his ear. Izuku felt tears well up. *He had such good friends.* "Oh hey, you're fine, you're fine." She gave him a hug. *Izuku really needed one* .

"Ocha, I am so glad to see you," he said into her shoulder. She smelled like spring and fresh laundry.

"Where's Nedzu?" she asked.

"Upstairs? We're trying to get more information on Nedzu's villain. Why are you here?"

"I am a *double agent* !" she said, practically vibrating. "It's amazing. I'm working with Hawks and Endeavor and I'm sowing *chaos and discord* and..."

"Wait, Hawks? But... what are you guys doing in this building? Double agent for what?"

"Oh right, there's this vigilante task force, right?" Ochako said. Izuku felt the start of an alarm bell ringing in his head. "And I got *recruited* , and there's the number one and two heroes *on the case* and then there's *me!* and they haven't figured out *anything* , you'd be so proud."

"Vigilante task force? Like, you're working *with* vigilantes, or... you're trying to *bring in* vigilantes? Because, not gonna lie, I'm kind of on the wrong side of *one of those* , and I have a bad feeling that..."

"Yeah, it's probably not a good thing that you're here. *In this building* . Because we're searching it. It's okay, though, chaos and discord includes getting you out undetected."

Izuku let out a breath. It wasn't... good. But he wasn't alone.

"How?" he asked, pained. "Wait. You said *we?* "

"Yeah Hawks is taking the top floors down and dear old Pops is waiting on the roof because somehow we managed to convince him he's not subtle. I mean. Hawks did. All I do is wind him up. It makes him *less subtle* . I think he's just happy to be as far away from me as he can be."

"Hawks is... Hawks *is* the worst case scenario, Ocha! He-"

"Pretty sure Endeavor is your worst case right now, Deku," Ochako said, patting his head.

" *Second worst* , then, because he's frighteningly efficient with those feathers of his. And I can't even... even if I could see they would be almost impossible to avoid."

Ochako laughed in a distinctly Nedzu fashion. "Oh, I don't think we need to worry too terribly about those feathers. He's down to the bare minimum."

"Uh... do I want to know what you did?"

"Yes!"

"Um," Izuku wasn't sure he did actually want to know.

"He's tracking, like, half the ravens in the city!"

"The... the ethics committee?" Izuku had initially been uncertain about Kouda's ravens, but raven justice was actually pretty effective. And the ravens were smart.

"Yeah! I've got him convinced that they're passing messages for the vigilante network instead of passing judgment. The ravens think it's hilarious. But that leaves him with very few feathers. This job though," Ochako pauses. "This job wasn't supposed to... actually turn anything up. We're basically glorified security guards, if the way Hawks and Endeavor talked about it is any indication. Someone called in a tip, I think."

"You think?" Izuku asked.

"I'm only part of the task force because they suspect I have contact with the vigilantes," Ochako said offhandedly.

"Ochako. Ochako, that sounds *really bad* ," Izuku said.

"Bad- *ass* ," she said. "Besides, I'm here to pull *your* ass out of the fire."

"Fuck. Hawks is going top down? Nedzu's going to the top floor. We've got to stop him. I don't... I don't have a phone. How high do you think he's managed to get?"

"Hell if I know, I just got here. When did he leave?"

Izuku fumbled the little All Might clock out of his front pocket. "What's this say?"

"'Night time sleepy edition All Might alarm clock tradema-'"

Izuku flipped it around. "Not the *time."*

"One fifty five, pm? Is this American merch? American *trash* merch? Didn't you..."

"Shut up. He's been gone fifteen minutes. Damn, he could be anywhere."

"Doesn't he have your phone? I kind of got the impression that he would sooner part with his tail than that thing," Ochako asked.

"Yeah, but *I don't* ," Izuku hissed. Ochako moved and bopped him on the head with something hard with corners.

Oh.

Right.

"Uh, can you dial the number?" Oh god he hoped Nedzu picked up. It rang seven times before it picked up, silence playing out on the other end. "Uh, Nedzu?"

"Midoriya?"

Izuku breathed out a sigh of relief. "Nedzu, you have to come back. Ochako is here with Endeavor and Hawks searching for vigilante activity. *From a tip off."*

"Shit," Nedzu whispered.

"Hawks is working his way down, Ochako is going from the bottom to the top. Endeavor is on the roof. Hawks only has a few feathers, so if you stay out of sight you should be ok?"

"Damn. I'll have to... I'm so close..."

"Did you find his office?" Izuku asked.

"Something like that," Nedzu said.

"You two need to get out of here *now* ," Ochako said, pressing her head against the other side of the phone. "I can get Deku out on the parking level, do you think you can make it there on your own?"

There was a rustle and metallic clang from the other end. *"I'm back in the vent now, but if Hawks is anywhere close by he might have heard that. You need to get moving. I'll catch up."*

Izuku felt a thrill of danger and welcomed it. It pushed out the *what if* and replaced it with the *now* . He pushed the phone back at Ochako, but she didn't take it.

"Keep it. Keep it connected. *Nedzu don't hang up* . Just keep it in your pocket until you can get rid of it. You'll need to get rid of your phone too, if they are monitoring mine."

"They're monitoring this number?" Izuku hissed. "And you just, *gave* it to me?"

"Don't overthink it, Deku. Warning Nedzu was first priority. Come on, let's move while the bathroom is clear," Ochako said briskly.

Well, if there was one thing Izuku knew about a mission going to shit it was that you needed to keep moving. He nodded and Ochako pulled him to the door. He tripped on her heels a few times, but otherwise kept up easily. She pulled him out into the hallway once she established it was clear. She stopped him a little further down and the alarm clock announced the hour. Izuku relaxed a little. Forty minutes was plenty of time if they could avoid Endeavor and Hawks.

"Alright. Do you want me to go with you to the parking level, or do you want me to go head off Hawks?" Ochako asked. Izuku pulled the phone out his pocket and brought it to his ear. Nedzu was panting on the other end, punctuating his footsteps.

"Nedzu, I'm sending Ochako up to distract Hawks, alright?" Izuku asked. It wasn't really a question, Nedzu's safety was his primary concern right now.

" *Got it* ." The fact that he didn't even protest was concerning.

"Go help Nedzu," he told Ochako.

"Alright, I'll get you in the elevator and press the first parking level. Just get out when the doors open and try to... keep out of sight?" She said. An elevator dinged and he was pushed into it, a harsh 'tac' as Ochako pushed the button. "Good luck," she said before the door closed.

The muffled quiet and motion of the elevator was a supremely uncomfortable experience. Izuku grasped onto the handrail tightly. Luckily it wasn't long before the doors opened again, but...

A conversation stopped.

There were *people* .

Fuck.

Izuku kept his head down and pushed past them. No one called out after him so he assumed he went unrecognized. He clenched his eyes shut for courage and kept walking straight until his toe

hit a wall and he stopped. Behind him the elevator doors closed and the resumed rumble of conversation cut off.

Was he alone?

Izuku pulled out the phone and held it to his ear, turning his back to the wall. Nedzu was quieter now, but until Izuku was alone he wasn't going to start talking. He strained his ears for footsteps or voices but it seemed like no one was there. If someone was silently watching him he was probably fucked, but if someone came upon him now he'd just be some guy with a phone.

He needed a place to get out of sight. Away from the elevators would be a good start. Figuring it wouldn't matter either way, Izuku followed the wall to his left. He kept expecting the space to open up, to run into a car, but his fingers eventually encountered a door instead.

Wait.

He scuffed a toe against the floor.

The *polished* floor. Which squeaked under the rubber of his shoe. Which smelled neutral, and not of exhaust and oil and damp. In an air conditioned hallway.

He wasn't in the parking garage.

He'd got off the elevator too early.

Behind him, he heard the ping of the elevator again. Not giving himself time to think, he pushed on the door (which thankfully opened) and slipped into the room. The ambient noises were muffled as soon as he eased the door shut. Good... soundproofing? He put the phone back in his pocket. He carefully slid forward along the wall and found another door some five paces in. A full circuit of the little room told him he was in an antechamber of some sort. The doors he had come in seemed to have windows. Anyone from the hallway could see him.

The other set of doors was solid.

He needed to meet up with Nedzu without being seen. Knowing that there were windows to the hall behind him made him feel exposed. He pushed open the solid door in front of him before he could overthink it.

"...and that's all the question we have for you today! Thank you for being with us today!" an overly cheery voice said.

A *familiar* overly cheery voice. The one from his nightmares.

Yumena .

Hero talk show host.

Architect of his third most humiliating tv appearance.

"Thank you for having me," said another deeper voice. "I was glad to be able to get a chance to talk about some of the things closer to my heart. Remember, my agency is doing a fundraiser until the end of this week! Stop on by for your own exclusive *'Stop, don't Shock'* t-shirt!"

"Let's give them a hand for that wonderful interview!"

To the right an audience applauded and whistled. Someone screamed *'Taser, we love you!'* . Izuku

kept a hand on the door and slid over to the wall. It was padded to baffle the noise. Eerily familiar theme music started to play over the audience's racket.

Maybe the hallway was the better choice.

Before Izuku could backtrack, a hand caught his shoulder.

"Hey, what are you doing here? Can't you see..." the voice trailed off as Izuku was turned towards him. "Hey man, are you alright? What happened to your face?"

"Um," said Izuku helpfully. His hand was grabbed and he was tugged along away from the door. *Great.*

"Come on, one of the girls in make-up is also our first aid, she'll have a look at you."

"You d-d-don't n-need to..." Izuku stumbled. "I-I-I'm fine! R-r-really!"

They didn't slow down. Izuku was pulled into a perfumed area. He could feel the heat from the lights warm what little of his skin was uncovered.

"Hanako!" his helpful companion called.

"What?" came a distracted voice.

"Hanako come look at this guy's face, bring the first aid kit."

"Oh no... you don't need..." Izuku protested. Someone sighed in a theatrical manner. Izuku was pushed onto a stool.

"I'm *busy* , Manzo" came Hanako's(?) voice. "And it already looks like someone first aided the shit out of him. Why did you bring him here?"

"Uh I..." Izuku

"Not you," Hanako cut him off.

"Come on Hana, just have a look at him?" Manzo (?) said. Someone was resting a hand on Izuku's shoulder. He did his best not to grimace.

"What do you think *first* aid is, Manzo? He's already covered in bandages. What else do you want me to do?"

"I don't know, just make sure he isn't going to keel over or anything. I'm not going to be responsible for sending someone off to die in the lobby. *Again* ," Manzo said. Izuku had concerns.

"Oh for... Manzo, that was *one time* ," Hanako said.

It should have been *none time* , thinks Izuku. But what does he know?

"Hey, this isn't really... I'm just fine, not dying!" Izuku assured them.

"Please?" Manzo asked. Hanako sighed again.

"Fine, get out of the way," Hanako said. The hand was removed and hands came up to remove the mask and hood. Izuku flinched away too late. He tipped his head down to hopefully avoid recognition, but... "Oh my god, what the actual.... this is *impossible* ."

It was too late.

"What?" said Manzo. "Is he already dead or something?"

"Manzo... Manzo, *do you know who this is?"*

"Uh, no?" Manzo said.

"This is Deku!" Hanako whispered harshly.

"Wait!" Izuku protested. "Don't, just *shhh!"*

"So... he *is* dead?" Manzo asked.

"Obviously not! This is... What the hell is Deku doing here?" Hanako hissed.

"Deku is trying to keep a low profile, so if you could just..." Izuku hissed back.

"Hey! I've only got five minutes and I am sweating like a pig. Hanako! I need you, stop whatever nonsense you're doing," came a new voice. Izuku turned his head away and pulled up the hood again.

"Uh, right away Yumena," said Hanako. Footsteps clicked away from his chair and Izuku hunched his shoulders. Forget Hawks and Endeavor, Yumena was his worst case scenario right now. He had had one interview on the popular hero talk show and it had been...

Had been...

Izuku steadied his hand by gripping the stool firmly. *He was ok.*

"I thought Deku was dead though," Manzo said.

"Obviously," Yumena said. "We're a full day into the news cycle and it is not slowing down. Management says we need to give it another day before running our top ten clips, but I feel like a chump *interviewing heroes* about their *damn charities* while there's a veritable media storm out there."

"But Deku-" Manzo started and Izuku kicked out in a wild attempt to interrupt. He caught someone's shin, Manzo's, going by the yelped "Ow!" he got. "What did you do that for?"

"Why don't you just do what you usually do, go off script?" Hanako asked. Oh that didn't sound good. Hanako had a teasing lilt to her voice. An *'I know something you don't know'* tone. She was leading up to...

He could just run. Sure he had no idea where anything was, but anything was better than what he felt was coming. He got up off the stool.

"Go off script with *what?* I'm a master at improvising, but I would need something *new.* I'm not just going to go up there and rehash what everyone else is talking about. I *lead* the conversation, not follow it. I'm not a news anchor," Yumena said.

Izuku shuffled a couple of steps to what he hoped was the door.

"Well, what if I told you..." Hanako started. Cold sweat dripped down Izuku's spine.

Later, Izuku would not be able to precisely recall the events in order. He could remember the smell of powder and the scratch of nails as Hanako gripped his face to apply makeup. He could remember the bruise in his ribs after Manzo tackled him. He could remember the shrill cackle Yumena gave after she realized who was sharing the powder room with her. He could recall at some point Manzo apologizing, Hanako scolding, Yumena threatening.

Between trying to make a dash for it and ending up in a chair under hot lights, smelling of powder and hairspray, Izuku wouldn't be able to tell you how it happened.

Just that it did.

And here he was now.

Into music played out over the excited murmur of the audience.

"Welcome back everybody!" Yumena cheered. The audience roared. Izuku wanted to cry.

"We have a special treat for you tonight! Now, I'm sure you are all aware of the news going around about the late hero, Deku. I mean, who hasn't heard about it? You'd have to be living under a rock!"

The audience laughed. Izuku didn't find it funny.

"Well, I'm here to tell you all that everything you've been hearing is WRONG!"

The audience gasped.

"Yes, that's right, you heard me. Wrong! Score one for the conspiracy theorists, right? Today, right now, I'm going to give you incontrovertible truth that the reports of the hero Deku's death have been greatly exaggerated. How do I know this, you ask? Where's the proof?" Yumena laughed. "Well, don't take my word for it, see for yourself! Cameraman Manzo?"

The audience went wild.

Izuku could just get up. Leave. It would be an obvious attempt at an escape, and he would have to navigate the steep drop off the stage, dodge security... and find a door... and. Well.

"That's right! Deku's back! And he's here for his first post mortem appearance on this show! We've got a great show here for you tonight, folks!" Yumena said. Izuku slumped in his chair.

"This is a last minute interview, so I haven't had a chance to set up my usual insightful questions, but I'm not the world famous Yumena for nothing! That also means there's some space here for a bit of audience participation! Put on your thinking caps, folks, and I'll get things warmed up.

"So, Deku, what made you think faking your death was a good idea?" Yumena asked. Izuku's mind went blank.

"Um... I. Um.. Sorry?" he asked. "Sorry."

"It would be understandable that the pressure would be a little much for someone like yourself, but *faking your death* is a pretty dramatic response! Couldn't you have just retired quietly?" Yumena asked.

"I'm... already r-r-retired?" Izuku said. "S-s-sorry?"

"Wouldn't you like to apologize to all your broken hearted fans for the emotional turbulence you put them through? This past day would have been a nightmare for them, and it was all just some... stunt?" Yumena pressed.

All Izuku could think, though, was, "What fans?"

"Wow," Yumena laughed. "How can you not be aware of all the people inspired by your persistence in the face of your disability? Your story is an inspiration to millions, and you claim to not even be aware of this?"

The crowd 'Oooh'-ed. Izuku's head spun. He felt wrong footed and... angry? He opened his mouth to retort but nothing came out. *What fans?* People watched 'Deku's career for the same reason people watched train wrecks. Morbid curiosity.

"He's speechless! Hold on, Deku, we've got an anxious fan in the studio today who appears to really want to ask a question. Yes, you, get him a microphone. Yes, go ahead."

"Hi, um, Deku? Hi. I just wanted to say, first, thank you for all the hard work you put in as a hero. Really inspiring," the person said.

The audience 'Aww'-ed.

"You got an actual question there, short stack?" Yumena prompted.

"Ah, yes, yes I do. I can't help but wonder if you... if you faked your death in response to the news about Ground Zero? And making it to top three? It's just... just. Well, you're blind now, and you never topped out beyond 57, and now you just... just wouldn't have the chance?" the 'fan' asked.

Great. *Kacchan.* Just the topic he wanted to bring up in this supremely uncomfortable and hostile space. He should just... congratulate him on number three. Play the hero solidarity card, blank his face behind his signature smile and laugh it all off.

He just. He was just so *tired* . "It makes no d-d-difference to me what Ground Zero does," he said.

"But aren't you like... rivals? He mentioned you in his acceptance speech and..." the person continued.

"No comment," Izuku grumbled.

"Oh it seems like we've hit a sore spot there. Deku, how would you say-" Yumena started, only to be interrupted by a door slammed open from the back of the studio. The audience startled like a flock of birds, clothing rustling as everyone presumably turned to catch a glimpse of what was happening.

"THAT!" came a booming voice. *Ochako! Oh thank god.* "IS NOT DEKU!" She yelled.

Wait, what?

"I'm sorry, who are you?" asked Yumena. Izuku could hear the giddy anticipation in her voice. She knew damn well who it was.

"I AM THE GRAVITY HERO, URAVITY!" Ochako boomed. Ochako was downright theatrical when she wanted to be. "AND I AM HERE TO APPREHEND THIS IMPOSTER!"

"I'm sorry, but he appears to be Deku to me. I never forget a face," Yumena said. "Manzo, get a close up of Deku. I want our audience to be shown proof beyond a doubt!"

Ochako stomped up the stage and landed a hand on Izuku's shoulder. She squeezed a couple times. Izuku was too relieved to try and figure out what that meant.

"His face is heavily bandaged, and the hair is easily replicated with a wig. I'm afraid this is hero business," Ochako said. "This interview is over. Thank you for your cooperation." She tugged Izuku to his feet.

"Wait! You can't do this, this is my interview-" Yumena sputtered.

"Ma'am!" Ochako barked. "Please do not interfere."

And *then* there was a shattering of glass. The audience screamed. Izuku smelt burning fiber. Another door slammed open.

"Endeavor! Hawks!" cried Yumena, likely for the benefit of the viewers at home. "What is going *on* here!"

Well, this was special wasn't it. Three of the four biggest threats to his existence all in one room.

"YOU!" shouted Endeavor. It seemed he was at the 'angry beyond sentences stage'. "STOP! *VILLAIN!"*

Izuku had been called many things in his life. Useless. Worthless. Weak. Bad influence. A waste of space. But being called a *villain* ... That was new. New and terrifying. He'd seen what happened to villains who challenged Endeavor.

If he didn't move now there'd be nothing left of him.

Was the room getting hotter?

Ochako removed her hand from his shoulder and he felt... *light* . Oh... Oh. *That's* what the shoulder squeeze meant. Ok. So should he just... pick a direction?

A shrill squeal rang out over the studio. To the untrained ear it sounded a little like mic feedback, but to Izuku it sounded an awful lot like Nedzu. It echoed from his pocket half a second after. Izuku was quick to bring the phone to his ear. A quick series of quieter noises had him facing the right direction and then Nedzu said "Jump!"

Izuku leaped.

"Stop him!" Endeavor roared. "Release your quirk, you air headed little-"

"Shut up, *Dad,* I'm trying to do my job!" Ochako shouted.

"I'm not your *Dad! You're an ex-daughter-in-law,"* Endeavor roared. "And what you're *doing is fuck all!"*

And the room got hotter...

"I had everything under control until you showed up to ruin everything! *As usual!"* Ochako shouted.

And hotter...

"This, *disrespect...!* You... How dare-" Endeavor sputtered.

And hotter.

"Disrespect yourself!" Ochako roared.

Zero gravity was really disconcerting when you couldn't see where you were going. It felt like it was getting hotter, so perhaps he was getting closer to the lights. Then again, he could just be getting closer to Endeavor. He tried not to think about how wildly he was spinning and kept his hands braced in front of his face. Nedzu was quietly muttering on the phone; "That's right, you're doing fine. We'll get you on the catwalk and I'll meet up with you. We just have to- watch out!"

Hawks was fast, but luckily for Izuku not *silent.* His feathers whistled tellingly. Izuku was able to contort out of the way and kick himself off the hero. There was a startled grunt as Izuku shot away, tucking his feet in to make a smaller target. Unfortunately this precluded him from protecting his face from the metal bar he soon came in contact with.

"Ow..." Izuku muttered as he belatedly grabbed onto the rail. He swung himself around it to put the structure safely under his feet. There was a thud that shook the metal structure as Hawks landed in front of him.

That wasn't the only issue though. Izuku could smell smoke.

Smell is an understatement.

He coughed.

"Fire!" came a shout from below. Ochako, he thought. Gravity was returned to him suddenly and unpleasantly. "The studio is on *fire! Everybody out!"*

The audience began screaming.

"Deku," said Hawks. A couple metallic footsteps closer. "Deku, you need to come with me *now.* You have nowhere to run and this room isn't safe."

"Nowhere is *safe,"* Izuku said, backing up carefully. "If I go with you I'm *dead."*

"What? No, nobody is going to hurt you. We just need to ask you some questions..." Hawks pressed.

The sprinklers came on.

"You have no idea what's actually going on," Izuku coughed. "And I know, I *know* it sounds paranoid, but there's something *big* going on. I can't go with you."

"So you're going to stay here? Suffocate on smoke? That's *better?"* Hawks asked, coughing at the end. "Come on, we need to leave now."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Izuku said, crouching down to try and get out of the smoke. He put his sleeve over his mouth and nose.

Come on, Nedzu.

"We just- AGH!" Hawks was interrupted by a loud hissing and a metallic thud. Something skittered rapidly towards Izuku and landed on his shoulders. Paws settled around his neck and whiskers tickled his ears.

"I think it's time to leave now, Midoriya," Nedzu said. "To the roof!"

Izuku relaxed into the rhythm of following directions, running at full tilt along the catwalk. Nedzu struggled to squeak through the smoke, but it wasn't very long until they had shut themselves up into a vent.

And from there they went down.

Now what, thought Hitoshi.

Aizawa was slumped on the ground, passed out from the sedative. Blackout was still, blankly staring into space. Hitoshi's face smarted from the hastily removed tape.

How long did he have before backup came?

"Oh my god, that was wicked," said a voice. Hitoshi shrieked, fumbling his hold on Blackout. He clamped down on it before his control could break.

"Oh no dude, chill, it's just me," said the empty corner.

Toru . Sensei had been looking over at *Toru* .

"Toru?" Hitoshi asked weakly.

"Yeah man it's me! Good to see you buddy!" Toru was now way too close, leaning against Hitoshi's arms as she started fiddling with the handcuffs. A set of lock picks came out of nowhere.

"Where were you keeping those?" he asked weakly. Toru stilled.

"You know I wear clothes, right? They have these things called pockets?" she asked. Hitoshi said nothing. "Don't tell me you thought I still went around naked. Oh my god, *men."* Thankfully she continued unlocking the cuffs instead of leaving him there to figure out himself. "' *Thanks, Toru, for helping me out.' 'I couldn't have done it without you, Toru.' 'It's really good to see you, Toru.'* No, it's ' *did you remember to put on clothes today, Toru'* ?" she muttered to herself.

"I, uh, thanks," Hitoshi said. Toru patted his shoulder.

"Better. Now. We need to get you out of here. Momo's ready with the car, we just have to sneak out. So let's just-" Toru said.

"Wait! Wait. Toru, how much did Sensei tell you? About what's going on?"

Toru sighed. "Big bad is one guy with a blinding quirk. Maybe a bigger bad or partner with a foresight quirk. He took down Nedzu and everything's been fucked since then. You guys went and triggered a trap in order to learn more, *like geniuses* ."

Hitoshi got the feeling she didn't actually mean 'geniuses'.

"And now I'm hauling your asses out of the fire. Cause you would have been screwed without me," Toru finished. Toru was big on credit. She had to be, she didn't get it by default.

So Hitoshi clamped down on the ingrained response of 'we were doing just fine' and said, "Toru we would be screwed without you, you are a hero among heroes. Everything hinges on you, and we are the poor fools without a plan."

"You don't have to sound sarcastic about it," she said.

"For once in my life I honestly mean it. Really. Just... bad habit. Thank you, honestly," Hitoshi said.

"You're welcome," Toru said. She was pleased enough to stop messing around with the lockpicks and just open the cuffs. Hitoshi rubbed his wrists.

"So you know just about everything, then. So what do you think we should do about him?" Hitoshi asked, gesturing at Blackout. "He's going to know we escaped. I got some information from him, but not enough to actually neutralize him. If we..."

"Hitoshi, buddy. You're overthinking this. What we do is take him with us. *Make him talk* ."

Sometimes Toru was scarier than the villains.

Chapter End Notes

I think... cheesy melodrama is my jam, with a taste of action to spice things up. I am both super proud of how cheesy this is, and super embarrassed. I have no idea if this story makes sense to anyone else, but it's very fun.

Interrogation?

Chapter Summary

Everyone has a little chat.

It's not a nice chat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shouta opened his eyes. As the blurry ceiling came into focus he tried to analyze why that made him feel so relieved.

"*...get him to write it down!"* a soft voice hissed. Female. Irreverent. *Hagakure?* What was she doing here? Instead of turning his head, though, he pressed back into the soft, soft... something. Whatever he was laying on. Couch? Pillows? Also, something smelled familiar...

When was the last time he had been this comfortable?

"*... can't, Toru, fine motor control is...* " another voice whispered back. Male. Soothing. *Hitoshi* .

In less pleasant news, Shouta's mouth tasted like something had died in it. Awareness of the distasteful sensation led him to notice the damn headache. He felt sick.

"*...just get him to*..." Hagakure's voice faded in and out of his awareness. His head pounded in time with his heart beat.

Well, at least he was alive.

Theoretically.

"*... do a little dance, no problem, but he's putting up a fight. Brute force only works with clear direction, I need...* " Hitoshi said.

Shouta suddenly felt too hot and too cold all at once. Sweat pricked his neck and he felt disgusting. He went to ask for help but all that came out was a cough.

"Sensei!" came a voice that was much too loud and much too close. Shouta winced and regretted it immediately. A cool hand pressed against his forehead. When had he closed his eyes again? A prickle of fear had him jerking them open. His eyes were assaulted by the hallway light that Hagakure did nothing to obscure. "Hey, you're okay. We're in one of Shouto's safe houses with Hitoshi, me, and Blackout as our prisoner. You've been asleep for four hours."

Four hours? Hitoshi had maintained a hold on someone fighting him for four hours? Damn his kids were *amazing*. But also...

They were running out of time.

Shouta grunted at her and miraculously a glass of water was placed into his hand. He sat up,

ignoring the spike of pain in his head, and carefully drank. The drinking became less careful as he realized how thirsty he was.

"Easy, easy," Hagakure tipped the glass down. That wasn't what he wanted but a part of him recognized the logic. "How are you feeling?"

Shouta just looked at her. *Through her.*

"Uh, Hitoshi, get the coffee," Hagakure said. *Ah, that was the familiar comforting smell.*

"Little busy, Toru," Hitoshi said. Shouta could see him sitting across from a very blank Blackout. *More like Blank-out, am I right?* Oh god, that was terrible even for him. Hitoshi was carefully stacking cards on the table. It was a mental focus exercise he rarely needed anymore. The fact that he was relying on it now didn't speak well for his confidence in his control.

"Right, right," Hagakure said nervously. She shuffled away to the small kitchenette. Soon enough she was back with that magic dark brew. Shouta downed it in one go.

"Holy shit, Sensei, take it easy," Hagakure scolded. Shouta shoved the mug back at her.

"*More* ," he ground out. "Please."

It took five more cups to feel human. Hagakure kept a hand on his pulse as Hitoshi half-heartedly tried to reassure her that Shouta wasn't two seconds from a heart attack.

"It's like six cups makes him baseline human, Toru, it's fine."

"It's a health hazard," she argued. "I'm not going to be the one to announce we *killed Sensei* on the group chat."

"Children, focus," he said as the headache receded enough to think through. "Hagakure, brief me on the parts I missed."

Hagakure took a deep breath. "You successfully locked down Blackout's quirk. Hitoshi managed to get him to respond and has since been in control, *like a total bad-ass.* Momo and I got us out of the station and back to one of Shouto's safe houses. We have attempted Izuku's phone but it's either off or busy. We've been trying to crack Blackout's resistance to quirk suggestion, but no dice."

"Have either of you checked the news?" Shouta asked.

"Shit," whispered Hitoshi.

"No, why?" Hagakure asked. "We've got the big bad right here."

"Maybe, but he's not the one with a foresight quirk," Shouta said. "The news is a pretty big part of this damn game and if we've got to get into more traditional interrogation techniques we're going to need to be up to speed."

"Sensei, I can do this," Hitoshi protested.

"Do what? Keep him sitting at the table? Make him do a tap dance?" Shouta asked.

"I just need the right suggestion," Hitoshi grit out.

"The most efficient way isn't always with a quirk. He'll give more away with his natural reaction to being kidnapped than trying to force anything out of him. We can always go back to brainwashing

if it doesn't work. Besides, you need a break."

"I'm-" Hitoshi winced.

"You're not fine. But you need to hold on a little longer," Shouta said. A laptop floated into view, dragging its cables into a safety hazard. Hagakure tilted the bright screen towards him. He winced away. "We want to see what's come out of Shihoshi today."

Dutifully, Hagakure hammered away at the keys and soon they were scrolling past sensational headlines. Shouta watched through squinted eyes, headache protesting the bright light. "So what am I looking for, Sensei?"

"Anything that seems like it describes an actual event, doesn't ask a question, and isn't a list."

"Uh, helpful. So... '*Top ten Reasons You Should Consider...'* no, '*Are we already at War with an Alternate Dimension?* ', no, '*Best Bombastic Bouts You Absolutely Can't...* ', no, no, Ah! This one; '*Deku Double Drops Doozy on Dead Deku Discussion'* ," Hagakure says. They read the article silently.

Well. Midoriya and Nedzu had certainly been busy.

Shouta breathed out slowly in the way he did to keep from screaming. Survival tactic from teaching high-school age children how to not die.

"What?" Hitoshi asked. "You can't just read a headline like that and say nothing."

"Midoriya and Nedzu went to Shihoshi," Shouta said.

"What? But they were... they were our backup," Hitoshi said. Shouta sighed.

"Nedzu has always been one for pushing to the ragged edge. It is likely he saw an opportunity he couldn't ignore," Shouta said.

"But... Izuku... He wouldn't just. Leave me there?" Hitoshi said.

Shouta was not going to touch that one with a ten foot pole.

Sounded like personal hurt.

"Somehow, Midoriya was roped into a surprise interview with Yumena."

"He hates Yumena," Hagakure whispered.

"And then gave Uravity, Endeavor and Hawks the slip while they tried to put out the fire."

"Fire!?" Hitoshi choked.

"Apparently Uravity called him out for being an 'Imposter'. Now everyone thinks there's a Midoriya clone out there instead of the logical conclusion that he's actually not dead," said Shouta.

"Can we go back to the bit about the fire?" Hitoshi asked weakly.

"Stop me if you've heard this one before, 'Tosh, but 'Uravity and Endeavor walk into a bar...'" Hagakure said.

"Right," Hitoshi mumbled.

"It doesn't have to be a bar," she said.

"I get it, *I get it*. So what does this mean? How does this help us?" asked Hitoshi.

"What kinds of things was he saying to you before we showed up?" asked Shouta.

"Well, he was pretty sure Deku was dead. So. I guess he believed that headline? He was also pretty keen to recruit me, but it was like a b-movie villain monologue. Also he's an ass," Hitoshi said.

"Mmm. Nedzu has plans to reveal their 'alive' status, but this clone theory might derail any usable data. Hard to say. Is there anything else in there that's actually news, Hagakure?" Shouta asked.

"Just more shit dancing on Izu's grave. God, these people are terrible," Hagakure said.

"Least Izu can't read any of them right now," Hitoshi joked weakly. "Shit, we're going to have to return this jackass's quirk to help Izuku."

"One step at a time, kids. Right now we need to focus on fact finding. Primary concern is the foresight quirk, everything else can be cleared up after. Hagakure, is he secure?"

"Uh, no, let me go get some ties," she said, shuffling off down the hall.

"Why is he still loose?" Shouta asked wearily. Hitoshi made a pained sound.

"Because," he said belligerently. So, no reason then. Just business as usual for his favorite trouble makers. After all those years of beating common sense into them.

Lovely.

Soon enough Blackout had been secured and ordered to forget his time being brainwashed. Shouta and Hitoshi situated themselves across from him, as alert as seven cups of coffee would get them, and Hagakure settled into comfortable stillness out of the way.

Oh, one more touch.

"Hagakure, can you change all the visible clocks ahead a couple hours?" Shouta asked.

"Done," she said.

Show time .

Blackout came out of the brainwashing with impressive composure. Shouta did not miss his quickening breath, his darting eyes or the red creeping up his neck. Hitoshi continued fiddling with his house of cards, ignoring the both of them to all appearances. Shouta just watched Blackout.

"So, where am I?" Blackout finally asked. Shouta had seen his eyes linger on the microwave clock before asking.

"Not important," Shouta did not take great pleasure in spitting that little line back. None at all. "Maybe you should ask a better question."

Okay. Maybe he was still bitter.

Blackout smiled at him. Shouta hoped it wasn't wishful thinking that made it seem a little strained. The man leaned forward against his binds, slumping back when they didn't allow him to so much as reach the table.

"Alright," he said. "Alright. I am man enough to admit when you've got me on the back foot. For now. What exactly do you think you're going to accomplish by abducting me?"

Hmmm. Something tickled at the back of Shouta's brain.

"I thought a little turnabout's fair play," Shouta said.

"So that's what this is? Revenge? How short-sighted," Black out sneered.

"Well, it works a lot better now that I can see again," Shouta said. Blackout paled dramatically and his eyes widened.

"My... my quirk. You... you took my quirk!" he shouted. Hitoshi's stack of cards tumbled down. Shouta flared his quirk instinctively. Blackout stopped short in his rage, though Shouta had the impression it wasn't in response to him. No, he seemed struck by a thought. The careful mask he had woken up with cracked a little more as he whispered "Fuck... fuck, *my quirk. That's why*... I should have *seen* ... Oh my god. You don't... you don't even know what you've done...!"

"I've had plenty of practice, thanks to you," Shouta said. He had questions, but Blackout was strong-willed enough to resist Hitoshi's quirk suggestion. He would have to tread carefully. Maybe use one of Nedzu's favorite tricks. "You've done a lot of damage. And now you're done. We're going to make sure you can't hurt anyone else."

"You think you've won," Blackout said incredulously. Shouta winced internally. *Why was it always a game to them.*

Beside him Hitoshi started stacking cards again, apparently oblivious to everything going on. But Shouta saw how steady his hands were. He was on high alert. Shouta waited.

"You think you've got it all figured out. Sanctimonious hero, taking the straight line to justice. But you have no idea," Blackout said.

"I think I have a fair idea," Shouta pushed. He kept his expression on the smug side of the scale. "After all, I'm not the one sitting bound and quirkless in a chair."

Blackout snarled. "I hardly need to use my quirk on you, you can't even see what's right in front of you."

"Oh?"

"These heroic ideals of justice just touch the surface. For years society has been spinning its wheels in the mud, never getting anywhere until someone showed up who could see the whole picture."

"And that person is... you?" Shouta asked doubtfully. He didn't even have to fake that expression.

"I never expected you to understand. You were just a convenient means to an end. It's a pity you will never be able to comprehend my vision. You just can't see beyond 'villain' and 'hero', labels of a corrupt and broken world. If you would just..."

Alarm bells were starting to ring in Shouta's head. Things were starting to take shape.

Blackout was stalling for time.

For what, Shouta couldn't guess, but it couldn't be good. Blackout was just ranting now. It had nothing on his usual smug monologues; it had an edge of desperation. It was just empty rhetoric,

the kind used to pad news articles and manifestos. He didn't even seem to be enjoying it.

"Who are you working for?" Shouta interrupted him, slamming his hands on the table. Blackout paused in confusion.

"Working... for...?" he asked. And then he smiled. "My dear Shouta," he said. "I don't work for anyone. People work for *me*."

Shouta gestured at Hitoshi, a quick flick of the wrist.

"Then why does your HR paperwork say your boss is *your mom?* " Hitoshi asked. Blackout sputtered out a syllable before he caught himself, but it was too late.

His face relaxed into blankness.

"He's stalling," Shouta said. "Trying to distract us. Do you think you can get a couple one word answers out of him?"

"Maybe, if it's close to the surface. What do you want me to ask?"

"Ask him who's coming," Shouta said. "Or who he is waiting for."

Hitoshi turned to Blackout and asked the question slowly and deliberately. Shouta was half expecting nothing, considering he'd resisted this long, but they were all surprised when he spoke.

"One, two, three," said Blackout in a monotone.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?" Hagakure asked. Shouta pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Children. Students. Baby heroes. Please do not feel like I am blaming you when I ask this question. But. Did either of you think to search this guy for tracking devices?" Shouta asked.

"We ditched his phone?" Hagakure said.

"Who's coming?" Hitoshi asked, probably hoping for slightly more detail from a more open ended question. Instead they just got;

"One, two, three."

"Are those... names? Or like... designations?" Hagakure wondered.

In the distance there was a muffled boom.

"Or," Shouta said, stomach sinking. "Rankings."

Another boom sounded, closer. Hagakure and Hitoshi both looked at him, eyes wide.

"We need to get out of here *now* ," Shouta ordered. Like well conditioned alumni of UA, they were out before the first window shattered.

Nagami Saki was angry. He was *furious* . He sat simmering outside the small apartment he'd experienced for all of five minutes but existed in for half a day. Police swarmed the area, taking

photographs and notes, but what good was it when the culprits were *already gone?*

The man clenched his teeth, tugging the blanket tighter around his shoulders. He had to remember he was a civilian here. The victim.

And he was, though, wasn't he? Those... *those criminals.* Those *thieves.* They had no idea what they had ruined. His work... his *future.* They couldn't possibly understand what they were interfering with. Those short sighted, bull headed *heroes* .

But they were *villains* now, weren't they? Kidnapping a man, using their quirks indiscriminately, running from the police. Neither of them had their license. No matter their intentions, when it came down to it the difference between being a villain and a hero was whether you agreed with the people in charge.

That's why *Saki* was the person in charge. Can't disagree with *yourself,* now can you?

A commotion at the edge of the crime scene shook Saki from his thoughts. Ah, the number three hero, strutting around like a peacock. Only recently introduced to the idea of the chain of command. He was a young hero, still full of ideals, but had proven that he could take direction if properly motivated. A high ranking was a simple reward in the grand scheme of things. The police scrambled in his wake.

"Perimeter is clear," said Ground Zero. He said this not to Saki but to the perceived leader of the police. Walked right by the only person here who had any *real* authority. Saki felt a swelling of irritation.

"Oh? I think even I could have told you that," Saki snapped. He blamed the situation for his outburst. Usually he was much better at control, but anyone would be a little one edge after being rendered quirkless. After having their plans trampled by a pair of *clueless, righteous assholes* .

"What the hell is he still doing here?" Ground Zero turned his sharp eyes on Saki. He stalked over, glancing at a nearby officer for answers, but the man merely shrugged.

Saki was getting tired of being treated like furniture.

"The villains ran," said Saki. "They're not here. You let them get away."

"Endeavor and Hawks are in pursuit," Ground Zero said. His voice was neutral, but the hero's hands were tightened into fists. Looked like the PR counseling had had *some* effect then.

"And what, you think that means you can just sit back?" Saki said.

"I *am* doing my job. I'm securing the crime scene and ensuring the *victims* are being taken care of properly. There is more to hero work than the chase" Ground Zero said.

"And what if they get away? What if they target me again?" the man challenged.

"Endeavor and Hawks are the number one and two heroes respectively," Ground Zero said, like that was enough.

"I want every man on the job," Saki said.

"I *am* on the job!" Ground Zero said, just shy of a yell.

"Do you have any idea who I am? Do you have any idea how screwed you would be if something

were to happen to me on your watch?" Saki asked. His civilian identity had nothing on his true reach, but Nagami Saki was still an important man. He could make or break a person with a single headline. He didn't even need to consult the future to accomplish that.

"Are you... threatening me?" Ground Zero asked incredulously.

Shit . It was one thing to let off a little steam, it was another to openly challenge a volatile, relentless hero while wearing his civilian identity. He was always more effective operating from the shadows. Saki drew back.

"I... I'm sorry," Saki said. "I'm just... letting them get into my head. I never thought... I've never been abducted before."

Ground Zero pinched the bridge of his nose.

"The reason I am still here is *in case they come back,* " Ground Zero ground out. He glared at Saki. It was strangely reassuring. Like looking at a caged lion that stood between you and your enemies.

"Right," said Saki.

"It would help me to do *my job* if you could tell me more about them," Ground Zero said.

"I told the police everything I know," the man said.

"Still. I would like to hear it from you while it's fresh. There might be details that we missed the first time around."

Saki sighed. It would be suspicious for him to recognize his captors (two underground, relatively unknown heroes), but there were things he could identify that would push the investigation in the right direction. It would be a pain to extract them from the justice system, but it would still be easier than prying them out of whatever hole they crawled into.

"I was at the police station. One of the kidnappers had been arrested for using his quirk on my kid. I was there to pick him up from the station. I think the police know his name? Shin something? There was a commotion and I was taken hostage. There was another man. He had dark unkempt hair, looked rough around the edges. He was working with the guy who hurt my kid. I can't remember anything after the quirk took hold." Saki shuddered.

"Shinsou," Ground Zero said darkly.

"You *know* him?" Saki asked.

"He actually used his quirk on you?"

Saki nodded. "It must have been what happened. I don't remember anything until they woke me up here," he said, gesturing at the apartment.

"And then they interrogated you?"

Leading question, Mr. Ground Zero. It worked in Saki's favor anyway.

"Yes," the man said, looking down.

"What did they want to know?"

"I'm not... really sure. They wanted to know who I... worked for? The Shinsou guy seemed to be

really upset about Deku being dead," said Saki. Ground Zero flinched.

"Deku's not dead," he said.

What.

"What... what do you mean?" Saki asked. A cold feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He had thought today had been enough of a roller coaster, but it seemed it wasn't done with him yet.

"Nerd is like a cockroach, he's not dead. He even appeared on live tv today."

"But I thought that was an imposter?" Saki asked. It had been there, black and white 'Deku *Double'.* They had been able to see it. He hadn't blacked out that... future...

But he couldn't black out futures any more, could he? He'd been *kidnapped* . He didn't have his quirk. He'd seen a whole day of news, a whole myriad of futures where he thought he couldn't lose. The kid had been able to project all those futures not because they were good or viable, but because *he hadn't been there to black them out* .

Didn't have the *ability* anymore. Hadn't been there to do it. He hoped the kid had enough sense to sit tight.

Someone had outplayed him. Someone with a connection to Deku. But Saki had been at the bottom before. He'd gone from nothing to everything. Everything he had he had built himself. What could he leverage now?

Ground Zero was looking at him with a frown. "How do you know about the interview?" he asked.

Shit . He was supposed to have been brainwashed for the last few hours. How could he... oh. *Oh.* "Shinsou mentioned it," the man said. "He was angry about how Shihoshi was handling the news about Deku."

Ground Zero's frown deepened. "That-" he stopped. Coughed. "Nevermind. I'd know that nerd's face anywhere. It wasn't an imposter."

Then Saki would just have to murder Deku harder.

"Shihoshi broke the news?" the man asked.

"If Shinsou was after you for Shihoshi's handling of the news, then who was his partner?"

"Like I told the detective; scruffy guy. Tall. Looks like he hadn't slept in a week. Stubble, irritated eyes, intense expression. He used his quirk, it made his hair float and his eyes red, but I don't know what it was supposed to-"

"Fuck," Ground Zero said. He stepped back from Saki, hands clenching. *"Fuck!"*

"What- *What's wrong?* Is... do you know who it was?" the man pitched his voice higher with feigned panic. Of course Ground Zero knew who it was. All Saki had to do was add a little fuel to the fire and Aizawa would be *fugitive number one.*

He wasn't a self made man for nothing. He could spot an opportunity a mile away. And making Aizawa out to be more dangerous than he was...? Well. The man wouldn't be able to sneeze without someone calling it in.

"Aizawa," Ground Zero said. "But he's been missing... He's. Are you absolutely certain? Floating hair, red eyes? Was there anything else?"

"What happened to me? *What did he do?"* Saki demanded.

"Look. If it was AIzawa you're fine. But he wouldn't-"

"What is his quirk?"

"It's temporary. Nothing harmful, you'll be fine," Ground Zero said, waving a hand. "Did he seem hurt? In trouble?"

"What is it?" Saki asked, daring to reach a hand out to the hero. Ground Zero glared at him when he gripped his elbow but didn't pull away.

"He can stop you from using your quirk, but it's temporary."

The man tightened his hold on Ground Zero. He stared into the hero's eyes, searching for the blankness he knows *(he knows)* he won't find. Ground Zero stared back at him in confusion.

"Then, does it work?" Saki asked.

"Does what work?"

"My quirk. Can you still see?"

"Of course I can still- Are you trying to use your quirk on me?" Ground Zero shouted.

"It's gone," the man said, dropping his hand. "IT'S GONE! MY QUIRK IS GONE!"

And then there was chaos.

Chapter End Notes

Ok so i had to give our bad guy a name. Too much 'the man' going on. i guess i'll have to name the kid too at some point. I am so bad at names.

I am not super happy with this chapter. I think it is a bit abrupt, but I'm also not sure how to lead into it without getting bored. Oh well! Enjoy the ride, I hope I'm not keeping too many things in my head and not on paper.

Also, Bakugou has entered the chat.

The Set-Up

Chapter Summary

Ochako learns something.

Shouto needs to do something about it.

Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter because if *I* can't torture you, what's the point?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saki was adaptable. *Clever*. *Resourceful* . He had had to escape the frenzy he'd started with the idea of a villain capable of stealing quirks, but it was a solid step towards regaining control. He'd picked up the kid (still sulking) and gone home. After the day they'd had, home was a welcome respite.

But was it *safe?*

Without being able to easily screen their future, Saki was left with a deep sense of unease. He'd had that assurance for so long that he felt naked without it. Shihoshi was shut down because of a bad fire in the recording studio, so he couldn't even escape to that little fortress. (But how secure was it, that the newly resurrected Deku could slip in?). He'd ended up packing them up and going to a random hotel in the city.

What if those heroes were following him? What if they waited to attack when he was sleeping?

He was *clever, resourceful and adaptable*. He just wouldn't sleep. Taki and Yugo, while their common sense was barely functional, were still useful walls of muscle.

Saki hated being on the back foot. He'd been king of his domain so long he was rusty at defense. But you know what they say about defense...

All you need is a good offense.

What could he do? He still had the kid (laying there, drooling into his pillow, still hunched into an angry sulk on the expensive sheets. Kid had refused to take off his shoes). So he could still see the future, even if it wasn't optimal. He was still automatically one step ahead of everyone else.

So who was his target?

Deku, Shinsou. Aizawa. They would pop up again, he knew it even without forsight. But he didn't just want to *wait* for them. He needed to do this properly. That meant dealing with them *himself,* seeing as he couldn't trust anyone else.

They couldn't be doing this on their own, could they? Their assets were frozen, their licenses

revoked (or expired). Who was helping them? Someone must be helping them. Where were their family, their friends?

Whose apartment had they taken him to?

Oh. Oh that was promising. If there was one thing he was good at (and he was good at a great many things) it was *research.* The backbone of a good question is research.

The man was *clever*. His intuition almost never failed. It cut down on days of research if he listened to his gut and followed the lead that seemed juiciest. The man was *resourceful* . He requested a few more tvs and woke the kid. He had a list of questions ready to go, and a plan. Now that he knew what he was looking for, it was just a matter of going down the list.

The man was *adaptable.* He might not have a quirk, it might not be pretty, but it wasn't actually that hard to blind someone the old fashioned way.

Ochako was still at large. *Free. With* her hero's license intact! She'd had to fill in mountains of paperwork over it, but most of it got swept away, neatly filed into 'the number one hero is a little rough around the edges but we can't shake the foundation of the hero system, so he gets quietly reprimanded instead'. The man had *not* quietly reprimanded Ochako. Their... discussion... had not been quiet at all.

It took two days for Endeavor to calm down from the Shihoshi incident.

On the third day they had a meeting for the task force. Ochako picked him up a gift basket. She filled it with fire extinguishers, fire blankets and smoke alarms.

Endeavor had hit the roof.

Not literally, unfortunately, but she was pretty sure his blood pressure was red lining. She had perfected her poker face, and smiled at him blandly as he lost the ability to form words and just shouted. Hawks had looked ill.

Ochako told him it was nothing compared to her first New Years as part of the family.

Endeavor banished her from the meeting. This had to be setting some kind of record. 'Spy banished from the meeting she was only attending so that heroes could use her as a lead and/or bait'. She wanted a gold star for this.

Like any self respecting spy, instead of leaving Ochako scuttled her way into the false ceiling (weightlessness was a god send for covert work) and *dropped those eaves.*

That was a thing, right?

She found a broken corner of a tile she could watch through. Down below in the little meeting room, Endeavor paced and Hawks sat hunched at the table. He slouched with his head in his hands, but he still tracked Endeavor's movement.

"She's still a lead," Hawks said.

Endeavor scoffed. "She's *worthless."*

"She was protecting Deku. It's obvious that she's involved with him, if not the whole vigilante operation. This is confirmation," said Hawks.

"She was *laughing at us,*" Endeavor growled. "She knows what we're trying to do. She's conniving, irreverent and *leading us in circles!"*

Aww! Ochako was almost moved to tears. *Nicest thing he'd ever said about her.*

"Look, we still should-" Hawks started. He was interrupted by a phone call. He glanced at the display and his shoulders went right up to his ears. He tapped accept. "Hello?... yes. Yes. We... Yes. I just... no...wait! I just need- alright. Hold on."

Hawks put the phone on speaker.

"You're on," he said.

"Thank you. I have some information for you. Move it to the top of your list, tap all your resources."

Oh, mysterious bossy voice, someone who freaks Hawks out. Ochako pressed her face to the dusty tile.

"Who are you?" Endeavor demanded. Hawks waved an arm to shush him. Endeavor glared. Ah, typical.

"Currently, I'm your best bet at making appreciable progress," said the voice. *"While we have never been formally introduced, you have benefited greatly from my involvement, Mr. Number One."*

"Then why haven't I heard of you before?" Endeavor demanded. Mr Mystery Voice had *balls.* But, maybe it was easier to sass the number one hero when you didn't have to look at him.

"I'm sure Hawks will be happy to explain. I'm afraid I don't have time to cater to your suspicion. This information is sensitive and needs to be used quickly to be effective. Gather as many heroes as you can for this."

"Why should we listen to you?" Endeavor growled. Hawks had given up trying to get him to mellow his tone and now just watched the phone.

"Why shouldn't you? I'm offering you the entire vigilante network on a silver platter. You would be a fool to ignore it."

What.

"And where did you get this information? Are you part of it? You will get no clemency from us even if-"

"You haven't been able to identify more than a minor cell of the vigilante organization with literal years of data. What makes you think you'd be able to find me? No, I'm not looking for handouts. I just want you to do your job."

"You dare-!" Endeavor shouted. Hawks stood up abruptly. *There was no way this mystery guy had anything useful, right? Who the hell was he?*

"Stop. Just... stop," he said to Endeavor. "Just give us the information and we will handle it."

"That's more like it," said the voice. Ochako could feel a wave of sudden heat from Endeavor.

This was bad... really bad. *Probably.* Being in the ceiling above a walking fire hazard was not the safest place to be, but she *needed* to hear the rest of it.

"Now listen carefully. Mark this on a map or write it down, we can't have this information intercepted..." said the voice and then proceeded to list each...

And every.

Safehouse.

Fuck.

Ochako gasped, desperate to catch her breath as she shakily dialed a number into the last payphone in the city. She squeezed the receiver with both hands as she wildly looked around for pursuers, which really only made her look more suspicious in the end. She smiled brightly at a man walking by with his dog.

He walked faster.

"Hi, you've reached Big Carl's Pizza and Sushi, an east-west fusion delight, how can I help you?"

"Hi! Hi, um, wait. Um, I need to order?" Ochako stuttered.

"I dunno lady, you called me. Do you want to order?"

"Yes! I mean, yes, I have... and order... for. Um. Delivery?" Ochako asked. She was pretty sure it was delivery she was supposed to ask for. What address was she supposed to... was it here? What street was she on?

"... and what would you like to order?"

"Oh! Oh, um. I want the bento special. I mean... the *special.* If you know... what... I... mean?"

"Would that be the sushi pizza or the pizza sushi combo?"

"I... uh. Look. I have no idea which is the right one, but I really need to talk to Shouto. It's important," Ochako said.

"You know he's the only one who actually uses the code phrases, right? No one else actually does that anymore."

"Just! Just put me through, *Carl,*" Ochako hissed.

"Not actually my name, but whatever."

The phone rang for ten terrifying seconds. Ochako bit her lip.

"Please state the nature of your pizza emergency," came a smooth monotone.

"Shouto! *Shouto*," Ochako said.

"Ochako. How did my father enjoy the gift basket?"

"What, *how did you know about that?* Nevermind! Big problem," Ochako said.

"You do realize you still use the family credit card? Even I can put two and two togeth-," he said.

"Shut up! They know. They *know* Shouto," Ochako said.

"Not that I don't appreciate the dramatic tension, but who knows? And what do they know."

"*Everything!* They know everything! Oh my god this is so bad, what are we going to do?"

"First you're going to use proper nouns and answer my questions."

"The task force! They now have the address of every. single. safehouse," Ochako wailed.

"Even the one between-"

"Everything! They're planning a simultaneous raid!"

"That's impossible."

"Well, it's *happening,"* Ochako said. "And we're *fucked* if we don't figure out how to counter attack. What are we going to do, Shouto?"

"How can they know all of them? You don't think..."

"Don't think what?"

"That Izu... if they found..."

"Shouto," Ochako said slowly. "Maybe you want to think carefully before you actually say what I think you're trying to say."

"Right. You're right. But if..."

"No! There's something else going on here. Deku would never give that information away, willing or unwilling."

"Then maybe someone else... Do you think...?" Shouto trailed off.

"I literally have no idea what you're trying to imply."

"Nevermind. It's not important. How sure are you that they're going to plan a simultaneous raid?"

"One hundred percent," Ochako said. "And they are moving *fast.* We have a day or two at most. I'd almost be impressed at how efficient they are, if it weren't targeted at everything we've tried to build the last five years."

"Alright. I'll come up with something. You need to go lay low somewhere until I need you. And not a safe house."

"No *shit*, Shouto. Also I don't have my phone, I gave it to Deku."

"... alright. That doesn't matter. Just stay somewhere with a TV."

"What are you planning?"

"It's best if you don't know. Stay safe," and then he was gone. Ochako glared at the phone. It was immensely satisfying to slam it down on the receiver, but it bounced out of the cradle and Ochako had to sheepishly catch it. She took a breath to steady her nerves, squared her shoulders and exited the phone booth.

Right into the warm, fiery chest of the number one hero.

Aizawa would have her head.

"I had no idea you could be so quiet," she said. The man frowned down at her, his flames casting dark shadows into the grooves of his face. He really did frown too much. "Uh, nothing to see here?"

"Oh?" he said, deceptively soft. "Then you weren't calling my son with details on a highly classified operation?"

"Uh..."

"You will not disgrace this family, *girl*," he said. "No more than you have already done."

"I thought you said I wasn't part of 'this family'."

"Enough of this farce! You will be coming with me," he said. He clamped a hand on her forearm. *Where were her reflexes today?*

"I'm actually... uh, a little busy right now," she said, fighting his hold. "Why did you follow me, anyway? Don't you have a highly secret raid to plan?"

"Hawks heard you leave the ceiling after the phone call. As you weren't supposed to still be in the building, it was a little suspicious. I left him to start calling in heroes. *Stop resisting.*"

Shit shit shit, this was bad.

"Since when have I ever taken your advice?"

To her surprise he sighed. A deep, world weary, lung capacity testing sigh. "Listen. If you only listen to one thing I say, *listen to this.* There is nothing you can do to prevent this raid. You are done. What you can do, however, is cooperate so that you don't drag my son into this further. I won't have him ruining the family legacy with this Deku vigilante nonsense. You will come back to the house, you will be *quiet* and you will stay out of sight while I clean up this mess."

"'The house'? Not 'the station' or 'jail'?"

"What part of 'quiet' and 'out of sight' do you not understand?"

"But I've already told Shouto-" she said.

"What Shouto 'knows' is that he has a day or two. We'll be done in *twelve hours."*

Shouto ended the call and returned to his seat in front of twenty different beautifully decorated cake samples. He didn't need to put away the phone because it was currently iced to his hand. Picking up the fork with his left hand, Shouto scooped a bite of the orange one and ate it. Aoyama set aside

his myriad of fabric samples and rested his chin delicately on his hand. His poise was excellent.

"What's wrong, mon cher?"

Shouto felt the cake sour in his stomache. He still had fifteen different samples to try. The current one was obviously a write off. His mouth tasted like bile and ash. His arm was cold.

"I'm..." Shouto said. Maybe the blue one would be better. He carved half a swirling rose away and popped it in his mouth.

No. Too sweet. Cloying. Acrid. The icing sat thick and heavy on his tongue. Aoyama put a hand on his wrist. Aoyama had been looking forward to the cake sampling for so long. He loved bright and fanciful decorating, he enjoyed Shouto's dramatic reaction to unusual flavors. And now...

Shouto dropped his fork.

Spat the icing in a napkin and folded it under a plate.

It is very good that they had been left alone in the fine dining room. He would have had to feel embarrassed about that. Luckily it was just him and Aoyama.

Just...

"I'm sorry," Shouto said. He looked at Aoyama. "I'm sorry."

Aoyama dropped his dreamy expression. His eyes sharpened and took in Shouto's face. It didn't feel like he was emoting, but Aoyama seemed to pick on something. He started frowning.

"Talk to me," he said. Shouto took a breath and then panicked slightly when it had nowhere to go. Ice grew up his neck.

What could he say?

'Everything was fucked'?

That in forty eight hours, all the people under his protection, all the people who *trusted* him, were about to be destroyed by something he had built?

He looked at Aoyama and shook his head.

"The facts then," Aoyama said. He lost his accent when he got serious. "Who was on the phone?"

"Ochako," Shouto said. *Was she ok?* He had hinted at having a plan out of *habit*. *He had nothing.* Where could she go, now?

"And... she's in trouble? What did she tell you?"

"We're all in trouble," Shouto said. "The safe houses have been compromised. All of them."

Aoyama went pale. Well. *More* pale.

"By the vigilante task force?"

Shouto nodded. Aoyama breathed out a long sigh, maintaining eye contact. Could he feel that swooping feeling? The one that felt like an unexpected drop? That one that made him want to hide and deny that anything had changed in the last few minutes? That made him want to just let the ice

keep going and going?

"This is my fault," Shouto said. "This is. I miscalculated, it-"

"No. No," Aoyama said. He took Shouto's left hand and for the first time in their engagement it didn't feel like an act. Shouto squeezed back. "We are heroes, mon ami. We are all heroes. This has always been a risk. We don't do what we do so that we can be safe. We do it to protect the people."

"And I was protecting them!" Shouto shouted. His outburst surprised him, but it was true. "I was trying to protect them and they *trusted* me. Now that trust is going to ruin them."

"You *have* protected them. It's not over yet," Aoyama said, fire in his eyes.

"What do I do?" Shouto asked. "What can I do? Until now I've only ever operated in spite of everything else. I've never planned a counter operation. What can I do in less than forty-eight hours?"

"What can *we* do," Aoyama said. Shouto went to pull his hand away. This was his problem, he needed to fix it. "No. *We*." Aoyama didn't let go. "We do what you have been doing, with great success, for the last five years. We do *everything*."

"What... what do you mean?"

"We are not like Izuku or Nedzu. We are not going to be able to identify the most effective plan, find the best angle. We are creative, but we are not strategists. No. We think of everything we can do, and we do *all of it.* Give everything, no holding back."

Plus Ultra.

Shouto was bad at choices. Making the right call, choosing the right words. He relied heavily on his friends for inspiration; either take them literally or do the opposite of what they suggested. Whichever struck his fancy.

Give everything.

Shouto could do that. He had told Ochako to watch the tv. It had seemed appropriately dramatic at the time, but maybe...

"We need to tell everyone," Shouto said. "We need to tell everyone *now*, that's what we should focus on."

"How?" asked Aoyama. "We don't even know everyone who uses the safe houses. At most we can tell our friends, maybe the people who follow the stream, but-"

"No. We tell *everyone*."

Chapter End Notes

Shouto: *ices up*
Aoyama: Uh you ok buddy?
Shouto: Are you reading my mind!?!?!?

Oh no i read a really nice, more serious/realistic fic and now my weird plot feels like a clown car. A clown car!

I... *can* do this! But man. Doubt!

The Fall

Chapter Summary

Ochako is a captive audience.

Shouto puts on a show.

Chapter Notes

I told you this was my next favorite chapter. Oh boy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ochako watched Endeavor leave another very loud voicemail for Shouto. Her wrist was handcuffed to the heavy wooden dining room table. It wasn't the obstacle here, the real problem was the fiery brute, but picking the lock would slow her down. It was also complicated by the fact that Endeavor never actually turned away from her. At least she could hide her hands in her lap.

Endeavor slammed the phone down. Ochako's wallet winced.

"Why does he not answer!" he yelled.

Being yelled at by a large angry man is actually pretty frightening. Ochako, though, had long been conditioned to fuel her fear into excitement. She smiled.

"It isn't exactly new, is it?"

"You understand *nothing*!" he said.

"Just because you don't like the truth doesn't make it any less true," Ochako said.

"What do you know? Who are *you* to pass judgment on me?"

"Oh jeez, I didn't realize we were doing *therapy* now. Let me get my little book of notes. Oh wait, *I can't*," Ochako jiggled her cuffed wrist meaningfully.

"I'm trying to *protect* you," he said. He thumped down into the chair across from her. It creaked ominously. "You just don't understand-"

"*Oh my god*, it doesn't matter if I *understand*! I don't *agree*! Why the hell are you keeping me here? Am I under arrest or not? If you're really so set on helping me, let me go!"

Endeavor sat back. His shoulders rounded, though his fists didn't release.

"Do you have any idea," he said, so much quieter this time, "How much trouble you are in?"

Oh Ochako hated how much he sounded like her mother right now. It wasn't fair. *He didn't get to*

speak to her like that. She willed the angry flush away from her cheeks.

"I know," she said "I knew from the moment this started what was at risk."

"Then why?" he asked. "You were already a hero. You have a license, support, *popularity*. Why are you so eager to throw that all away? What is it about Deku that makes him worth following into hell?"

Ochako felt a bit of a seismic shift in her view of this conversation.

Endeavor had no idea what was actually going on.

Ochako couldn't help the giggle that escaped.

"You think this is *funny?"* Endeavor asked, dangerously quiet.

"No, no, nothing funny at all. Just... what do *you* think is going on here?"

Oh, there was the frown again. "It's obvious."

"Humor me," Ochako pressed.

"You're already laughing," he said, deadpan.

"*Oh my god,* do not pick *now* to have a sense of humor. What do you think Deku actually has to do with all this? Deku's *dead*," Ochako said.

"I'm no fool! I saw him at the studio. I recognized him. I don't know what game you are-"

"Right, right, ok. Deku's alive, no moss on you. But still. What do you think he's doing?" Ochako asked.

"He's a *vigilante*! That worthless, two bit, sorry excuse for a hero who thinks he's above the system. He's always been outspoken, it's never been a secret! It's a surprise it's taken this long to uncover proof but that boy is a *mockery* of the whole hero system. He uses it when it's convenient, and goes behind the back of every hardworking hero when it doesn't suit him," Endeavor said. "And he's taking everyone he can down with him. I won't let him take Shouto too. If you are smart, you will accept my offer of protection."

Ochako stared at him. She looked down at her cuffed wrist, and back up to his face. He had somehow managed to manipulate a look of concern over all the entrenched frown lines.

"So... taking your prime suspect, locking her in your home, and refusing to involve the police or hero commission is... totally legal?" she asked.

"*That's different!* " he shouted. Flames roared into a mane around his head.

"*How!?"*

"I am the *number one hero,* and-"

"So if Deku was number one it would be ok?"

"No!" he roared.

"Then what's different?" Ochako asked. It was really getting too hot in here to keep riling him up,

but Ochako liked living on the edge.

"I know better!" he yelled. Ochako just watched as he tried to calm his breathing. "I know better," he said again. "I have been proven to be a prime example of a hero. I am the template-"

"So he's just following your lead then," Ochako interrupted.

"*No!* You don't... You don't *understand!"* he glared at her. "You are making me angry on purpose."

Oh fuck this.

"No, I am having a *conversation*. You are getting angry all on your own. I haven't insulted you, or called you Dad or any of the usual things that really get you going. You are doing this all on your own."

Uh oh. Well, Ochako might not have time to pick the lock, but she could still dislocate the thumb. She hated doing it, but it's better than the fiery murder she read in his eyes. Surprisingly, instead of leaning in toward her he closed his eyes. Took a breath.

"Where did I go wrong?" he asked. Ochako snorted.

"We don't have time. But if you're talking about this conversation, that went wrong the moment you handcuffed me to your dining room furniture," Ochako said.

"No, with Shouto," he said. He really had his eye on the prize, didn't he? Just breeze past that 'keeping a perfectly good suspect captive in your private home' and go right back to trying to *terribly parent an adult.*

"I am going to speak slowly so that maybe you might get it this time, but. *Shouto's actions have nothing to do with you,"* she said.

"Nonsense, he's been defying me since he started high school."

"He's an adult! He's moved on!" Well. One of those things was true, but Ochako liked to think Shouto had really come a long way since high school. He defied *everyone* now, not just his father.

"He hates me," Endeavor whispered.

"Oh no, this is way above my pay grade. Can't you hire, like, a real therapist? Maybe don't handcuff them to the table, bad first impression."

"You don't under-"

Valiantly, Endeavor's phone started ringing. What the heck was that thing made of, *diamond? Steel? Mei's lab equipment?* He answered it immediately.

"Shouto, you-" he started before he got cut off. Ochako could hear the panicked voice on the other end even across the table. She leaned forward to try and catch what they were saying, but Endeavor turned away from her.

"What do you mean, turn on the TV?"

It started with 'Get in the car, losers,' and ended with Izuku and Nedzu on Kendo's couch. The last few days had been a whirlwind. It turned out Monoma had never really gotten over his inferiority complex. Instead of channeling it into obnoxious challenges and embarrassing laughter, he had decided that the best revenge was to build a better vigilante smuggling network.

You know, *for kids.*

Well. Kids and any other person with an unfortunate quirk who needed to get out of town. They had gotten the front row tour as smuggle-ees through the more scenic parts of the network. Izuku was impressed.

Even though he really, really, didn't want to be.

"So you see, that's why everything I do is *amazing*, and everything you do is terrible," Monoma finished.

"I'm afraid I can't see," Izuku said apologetically.

"*Semantics* ," Monoma hissed. Izuku was terrified of how clearly he could picture the man's face. Izuku drew back.

"You certainly have been busy," Nedzu said. "Did you notice that-"

"Who wants more tea!" Kendo interrupted. She had been playing buffer between them for three days. She had a sixth sense for heading off Nedzu's attempts to stir the pot, though the strain was evident in her voice. Monoma, for all his profuse arguments that he was 'above petty rivalry' and 'enormously successful', got really defensive. Nedzu thought it was hilarious.

Izuku missed *responsible Nedzu.*

"I would love some!" Nedzu said. "Mr. Monoma, I am-"

"And cookies!" Kendo said brightly. Nedzu's tail thumped against the couch in irritation. Kendo gave a false laugh. "It's really been too long since we've all got together."

Izuku is pretty sure the four of them had never been alone in the same room before. Probably a good thing, judging by the way things were going.

Izuku was grateful for their help. *Really* .

He was just... tired.

There was a subtle electronic chime.

"Oh, would you look at the time!" Monoma exclaimed.

"I can't," said Izuku dutifully.

"You're not as funny as you think you are," Monoma said. "But I suppose we must make allowances. No, it's time for a little reconnaissance."

"Ah, do you have to leave already?" Izuku asked. *Thank fuck, a break.*

"Hah! No! We'll be doing it from this couch. It's time for Yumena's show."

The sound Izuku made was *dignified* .

"Her studio burnt down, you see," Monoma started.

"I don't."

"*You were there* " he hissed.

"Yes. It wasn't a good time. And because her studio burnt down, haven't they just been playing repeats of it? We know what happened, we don't need more speculation," Izuku said. He was pretty sure Yumena would be riding the buzz off his unplanned appearance for years, and *she* had the attention span of a goldfish.

He also didn't appreciate the re-mixes of his terrible responses rather than a more nuanced conversation about how *the Number One burnt down a studio on air.* No. It was all about Deku, who was either presented as a clown or a criminal mastermind depending on which made him look worse.

Why couldn't he just be a *hero?*

"Ah but maybe you missed something. Always good to be thorough, wouldn't you say?" Monoma asked.

"Actually, I-"

"*It was rhetorical!"* Monoma snapped. The tv was flicked on in spite of Izuku's feelings.

"...the show! We've managed to scrape together the outdoor studio, and just in time! I'm really excited about the guest we have today!"

Oh, was she moving on?

"Let's all give a hearty welcome to Balloon Time, who was recently exonerated for the murder of Deku!"

What.

There were many things Shouto admired about Aoyama. His hair. His disregard for social customs, both french and japanese. His uncanny level of knowledge about where to find a camera filming live on any given day. *('I follow their socials, mon ami')*

Uncanny .

That last one had proven useful today. Shouto needed to reach the biggest audience possible, and Aoyama had taken his hand, sparkled fiercely, and led him to an empty lot that had been commandeered by Shihoshi. More specifically, Yumena.

"THAT'S NOT MY NAME!" Balloon Time shouted.

They were just outside the temporary set of the popular hero talk show. The hastily constructed barriers did little to muffle the obnoxious declaration. Shouto shuddered.

"No," Shouto said. "No, I can't do this."

"Mon ami, you must," Aoyama said. His gaze was cool behind his tinted shades. While not dressed in his hero outfit, his casual wear was, if anything, more ostentatious. Shouto felt underdressed.

"I know," he breathed. Aoyama patted his shoulder. "This is going to end badly."

"Then make them regret it more than you will," Aoyama said. Shouto laughed. Well, he made a noise that *started* as a laugh.

"There's a chance I won't see you after this," Shouto said instead.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," Aoyama said with a wink. Shouto tried to tug his face into a smile, but it had already stiffened into his typical neutral mask. He took one of Aoyama's hands between his own.

"It's not going to be up to me," Shouto said.

"Are you... breaking up with me?" Aoyama asked.

"It's not you, it's me and all my extremely illegal activities," Shouto said.

"We've barely begun, mon cher," Aoyama said. "And don't think I haven't noticed the lack of endearments."

"Forgive me, moonbeam, I've got a lot on my mind," Shouto said. Aoyama held his gaze steadily. Some of the anxiety eased in Shouto. Here, he had lines, a script. For a relationship that was largely theater, it was oddly grounding. Shouto didn't know if he would be this steady without it. Aoyama was a good friend.

"More than me? I am your one and only, *tu es mon vrai amour.* I should be the center of all your thoughts in all things," Aoyama said, accent leaning more heavily on the french. "And just think, has there ever been a love story more compelling than when two lovers are kept apart?"

"I fear there will be no reunion, my treasure," Shouto said. It was surprising how easy it was to fall back into the familiar melodrama. There was no one watching, but it still wrapped him up like a cloak.

Like armor.

Aoyama looked at him knowingly. "They will not keep me from you, my love." *(You are not alone.)*

"Please do not follow me, dove, for I could not stand hell half so well knowing you suffered with me," Shouto said softly. *(This is a solo mission.)*

"If I cannot go to you, I will bring you to me. Our love will not be denied," Aoyama said. *(We will get you out.)*

"The things I am about to do... I fear there will be no redemption for me," Shouto said. *(Don't.)*

Lines from a play. Distance from the truth.

The tragic hero begins the final act.

"Remember you made a promise to me, Shouto," Aoyama said. *(Don't fuck this up.)*

God, this scene was wasted without an audience. He'd have to remember this kind of drama for a

more public display. Shouto wedged his cheeks upward through sheer force of will. Aoyama shook his head sharply and Shouto turned the grin down a few notches.

"Don't close your eyes," Shouto said. *(Watch me.)*

If there was one thing Shouto was good at, it was committing to a bit. Who would he be if he let his *father* upstage him?

Shouto brought his hands together, concentrated, and flung them outwards. A gout of flame demolished the stage barriers to his left and a glacier erupted to his right. Cameras swung around to catch the action while the audience panicked. Shouto rose up on a platform of ice to loom over the civilians. Spikes of ice rose in a halo behind him. The audience headed for the nearest exit.

Balloon Time stared in open mouthed shock. Yumena looked torn between rage and manic glee. Shouto stepped forward into thin air, only to be caught by a forming step of ice. Making it look automatic had taken months but the payoff was impressive.

"Enough!" yelled Shouto. Ice wrapped the stage to enhance the acoustics (a little trick he'd learned from Jirou), and his voice seemed to come from everywhere. The effect was wasted on a mostly empty theater. Oh well, the cameras were still rolling. "Why is he here? Why are you interviewing a *murderer?"*

"I'm not a murderer, you lukewarm popsicle!" Balloon Time shouted. Was someone feeding him lines? That was almost *inventive.* "Why don't you come down here and say that to my face!"

"Gladly," Shouto spat. God, why did it have to be Balloon Time. He stalked towards the stage and got in much too close to the seated menace and spat, "I am placing you under arrest for the murder of pro-hero Deku. *Again*."

"And Scandal comes out of the gate swinging, folks! What do you have to say to that, Balloon Time?"

"He doesn't know anything!" Balloon Time yelled.

"You said you killed him! A full admission of guilt! You were *happy!"* Shouto backed up. Balloon Time was not a pleasant individual to stand close to.

"Well I didn't! And you are pur-pers- blaming me for everything! You always blame me for everything!" Balloon Time said.

Someone had definitely been coaching him on what to say, even if it only partially stuck.

"That's because it's usually your fault!" Shouto threw his hands up. Yumena ducked behind her microphone.

"Ah! What else has he accused you of, Balloon Time?" Yumena jumped in.

"He's *always* trying to arrest me!" Balloon Time said.

"Because you are *always breaking the law!* And I do arrest you, I'm arresting you right now," Shouto said. "It just never sticks."

"Maybe I'm not doing anything wrong!"

"I've stopped you from robbing a bank multiple times," Shouto said.

"I wasn't robbing them," Balloon Time argued.

"Oh?"

"I just didn't have any money! Is that a crime? Not having money?" Balloon Time asked.

"It is when you throw the teller across the street for not opening the vault!" Shouto couldn't do this. It was like arguing with a brick wall. How was this still happening.

"Well, they should have just opened the vault," Balloon Time said.

Shouto looked at Yumena. She looked entirely too pleased by the... *discount* logic being thrown around. Shouto despaired for the civilization that found this entertaining. "Does this please you? Is this quality interview material, Yumena? I know you run a trashy show, but this is a new low."

"Now see here, I do *hard-hitting journalism!* I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to expose the truth!"

"The *hard truth* is that Balloon Time is a guilty criminal. He should not be walking around, free to conduct *bullshit interviews* while innocent people suffer. This man *killed Deku* and all you seem to care about is why I have it out for him," Shouto said.

"Why does everyone care so much about that damn Deku!?" Balloon Time roared.

"He was my friend!"

"Oh and the story just goes deeper. Tell me, Scandal, rumor has it that you an Deku used to be quite close. How do you feel about him faking his death?"

"Faking!? Are you mocking me?" Shouto was not a crier, but he was fair at faking it with a judicious application of thawed ice. "He was my ex-husband, of course we were close." Shouto wondered how anyone could forget.

Yumena's smile sharpened.

"Very close, then. But the fallout was quite... public. I assure you, Deku is alive. He was right here on my show."

"Uravity said he was an imposter," Shouto said.

"If you were hoping for an insurance payout, I'm sorry to inform you that he's quite alive, if a little worse for wear," Yumena said.

"I am literally half ice and yet, you are the coldest person here," Shouto breathed. He sat down heavily on one of the empty stage chairs. "How can you... he's alive?"

Put in a little waver in his voice, tremble in his hands.

"*Yeah,* Scandal. I'm innocent. It's not murder if the dead guy lives!" Balloon Time crowed.

"But you tried," Shouto said.

"There's nothing wrong with trying," Balloon Time argued.

"That's *attempted murder,"* Shouto growled.

"That's not *illegal!"* Balloon Time said.

"It.. it certainly is," Shouto said. *God, why Balloon Time.*

"Now that that's cleared up, Scandal, you can stop trying to arrest my guest and participate in the interview," Yumena said. She was really something. Hopefully the audience thought so too.

Hopefully everyone was watching.

"I am still *absolutely* going to arrest him," Shouto said.

"Hey!"

"You must admit, Deku faking his death was a pretty drastic action. Do you think retirement changed him? Made him bitter?" Yumena asked. If Shouto was here for any other reason than gathering the biggest audience he could, he would have walked out ages ago. As it was, he did need to play along until he could work the whole 'Oh yeah, the entire vigilante network is compromised' in there.

"Bitter?" Shouto said. "Deku is the most altruistic, hardworking and ethical person I know."

"Ah, but something must have happened to have him faking his death. Not exactly the work of the most stable personality, if you know what I mean?"

"I don't think I like what you are implying," Shouto said. "Instead of trying to figure out why the victim of a crime was a *victim,* maybe you should ask your guest why he thinks it's okay to try and kill someone?"

"I understand it was probably painful to keep up a friendship after your marriage dissolved, so perhaps you missed the signs. It was very clear to me that he was edge, during our last interview. Living rough?"

"Sporting the wounds of a *recent murder attempt,"* Shouto spat. Because it's always Izuku's fault when someone tries to kill him.

"Which is another interesting point. Balloon Time, could you comment on the last time you saw Deku?"

"Oh, well, I saw the show a few days-"

"In person," Yumena said with a plastic smile.

"You know, when you tried to *murder him,"* Shouto said.

"Oh! Oh, that was a cage match," Balloon time said gleefully. "I won! I am the strongest."

Even knowing Izuku was still alive, it was difficult to sit by while these empty husks of humanity gleefully discussed Deku's life like it didn't matter. Shouto stood and stepped away. It was ok. Dramatic body language was good for driving interest. It also helped him keep a lid on the inferno.

He didn't want to burn down Yumena's studio.

Yet.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but official cage matches have long been outlawed. Where would this have taken place?"

"Oh. Uh. I'm not supposed to say," said Balloon Time.

"And why is that?"

"Because it's... a secret?" Balloon Time said.

"You mean it was an underground fighting ring," Yumena said.

"Yeah, that!"

"And what was Deku, blind, retired Deku, of all people, doing attending an illegal fighting ring?" Yumena asked Shouto.

...fuck.

"I'm sure him being there was as much his fault as the attempted murder," Shouto said.

"So you were there, then?" Yumena asked.

"No, of course not. I wouldn't have sat by if I had been," Shouto said.

"Then how could you possibly know?"

Saying 'Izuku told me' was probably the wrong thing to say here. "Deku is a strategist. He would never willingly enter a situation he didn't have some advantage in."

"So he fights dirty? Balloon Time, comments?" Yumena asked.

"He won't hold still! Climbed all over the cage like a squirrel, wouldn't face me like a man. So I CRUSHED HIM!" Balloon Time got excited enough to leap to his feet. Shouto froze his feet to the floor to keep him from getting any closer. "Hey!"

"Sit down," Shouto said.

"You first!" Balloon Time yelled.

And this would usually be where Shouto would say 'Make me' and then Balloon Time would charge and all the cameras would be destroyed and...

Everyone in the safehouses would be arrested because they were caught unawares.

Shouto sat down.

Balloon Time looked surprised. So did Yumena.

"So you don't believe the rumors that Deku is leading a vigilante group in the shadows?" Yumena asked.

"Where are you getting these rumors?" Shouto demanded. Yumena smiled. Shouto wondered if she modeled for traditional demon masks on the side.

"There are perks to having your studio demolished in the presence of the Number One Hero," she said. Interesting how she didn't say 'destroyed by'. Hero Commission NDA's moved fast. "Exclusive interviews, for one. It was hinted that they were in pursuit of an alleged vigilante network."

"Alleged Vigilante Network," Shouto repeated. Adrenaline thrummed in his veins. This was the opening he was waiting for.

"As Deku was the only possible target at the time, it seemed obvious that they believed he had connections. Important connections," Yumena said.

Usually, Shouto had a plan. It might be a simple plan like, disagree with everything anyone said. Or, light the tablecloth on fire to end dinner early. (They weren't all winners.) His best plans usually came from his friends. To Shouto, dares were like instruction manuals. Although with those, nothing was on the line except his dignity.

But here? Here there was so much to lose. He had to expose the whole vigilante network without exposing its members.

Without dragging Izuku through the mud.

Shouto leaned back in his chair. Steepled his fingers, tilted his head forward and regarded Yumena through his bangs.

"Why is it," he said, "That everyone suddenly has faith in Deku's abilities only when they believe the worst of him?"

"Deku has never been subtle about his criticism of the Hero Commission," Yumena said.

"Deku only ever wanted to be a hero," Shouto said. "He's never publicly opposed the regulating body."

"He's known to be outspoken about policies that run counter to the system as it is today. He's certainly no stranger to subversive tactics and using the system to serve his own agenda," Yumena said.

"*What* agenda? Saving people?" Shouto asked.

"Getting his hero license was an unprecedented event. It is said he tested for it anonymously, to hide his quirk status. It certainly says a lot about his willingness to manipulate the system," Yumena said.

"I think it says more about the bias inherent in the process," Shouto said through grit teeth.

"Precisely! Why would a driven and motivated person like Deku stop there, though? Particularly if he thought he could do good, no matter how misguided?" Yumena asked.

Because Shouto beat him to the punch, and Izuku was too wrapped up in the search for Nedzu. He couldn't just come out and say that.

But.

Why not?

"Deku didn't form a vigilante network," Shouto said. He dropped his shoulders, raised his head. Yumena, scenting blood in the water, leaned forward.

"Oh?" she said.

"He didn't need to. It was already there," Shouto said.

"Hold on, are you confirming that there is a vigilante network? Live on air? That there is someone organizing vigilante justice right under the Hero Commission's nose? How do you *know?"* Yumena asked, motioning a camera closer.

"Because I set it up," Shouto said.

Yumena was speechless. Balloon Time looked lost.

"You... what...?" Yumena said.

"I am the mastermind behind the vigilante network," Shouto said, staring dead into the central camera. The cameraman stood stock still.

"But... how... you...?" Yumena was still catching up.

"One thousand, three hundred and fourteen safe houses. Eleven business fronts. Upwards of seven hundred active participants," Shouto listed. *Get the message, people, you're on the clock.*

"This is... this is... are you recording? Are you getting this?" Yumena demanded of the camera man. He nodded frantically.

"And Deku," Shouto said. "Had nothing to do with any of it."

"But you're a hero, you're already famous? What could you possibly have to gain from throwing all that away?"

"That man," Shouto pointed at Balloon Time, "attempted to murder my friend. Gleefully. *Remorselessly.* And he wasn't even kept off the street for a whole day."

"Fuck you too, man!" said Balloon time.

"That is the system as it stands today. A revolving door of villainous clowns who barely have time to stamp their name on the paperwork before they're out on the street again. Threatening innocents. Injuring my colleagues. Those are the people this system protects." Shouto said.

"You've sent numerous villains into life-long prison sentences. How can you challenge a system that protects us from the worst monsters of society?"

"Even a broken clock is right twice a day," Shouto said. "What's the difference between them and Balloon Time? That they have more than two brain cells to rub together?"

"Hey, I have brain cells!" Balloon Time shouted.

"Do you use them?" Shouto said. Balloon Time spluttered incoherently.

"So you set up a vigilante network," Yumena said weakly. "And Deku really had nothing to do with it?"

"This is exactly why Deku couldn't have anything to do with it. He's too outspoken and targeted to be able to keep it under wraps. I have resources and I'm a legacy hero," Shouto said. "No one expects anything scandalous from me except photo ops."

"Scandal is a very outspoken hero," Yumena said.

"And no one bats an eye. I'm harmless entertainment. Even my own father suspected nothing, and he was leading the whole investigation."

"Your father... Who burned down my studio chasing Deku," Yumena said.

Shouto guessed NDA's didn't survive shocking exposés.

"The same," Shouto said. "Which is actually what brought me here today. You see, I have a great many voicemails urging me to come home."

"What? Why would-" Yumena started.

"Endeavor doesn't want me dragged down by Deku when they bust the whole operation. Doesn't want me sticking my neck out for him," Shouto said. Couldn't hurt to drag his father through the mud a little. It also might take focus off Ochako.

"Bust? But-"

Shouto ignored her and hoped that he could get this out before they caught on and interrupted the feed. Looking dead at the camera he said "Being a vigilante isn't cool anymore, kids. Go home. It's officially over. Don't get caught, it isn't worth it."

Yumena looked stunned for a moment before she realized what was happening. Suddenly she was a whirl of movement. "Cut the cameras! Stop the feed! MANZO PUT THE DAMN CAMERA DOWN!"

Manzo did not put the camera down.

"Go to ground, get out of the city. They are comi-!" Shouto shouted.

Suddenly there was a flurry of movement as red feathers shattered the iced up studio. Yumena ducked for cover behind Balloon Time as he watched, slack-jawed. Brightly colored heroes stepped past the carnage and approached Shouto cautiously. He raised his hands above his head in surrender. He'd done what he came to do. He didn't want to hurt anyone.

But.

The more time and energy they spent trying to catch him, the less they had to track down his network.

Shouto dropped his hands, ice crackling up his right arm. This would be his last stand. It was time to go all out.

"Scandal!" called Hawks as he crested the mound of icy shards. He was flanked by a reluctant looking Rocklock and Fatgum. "Stay where you are!"

"What are you doing, kid?" Fatgum called. "I know you like the front page as much as anyone I'd ever seen, but this is *serious!"*

"I am serious," Shouto said. Feathers settled in a ring around him and Hawks approached slowly.

Rocklock frowned and crossed his arms. When he met Shouto's eyes he shook his head. He'd never officially joined the network, but could usually be counted on to look the other way. It seemed he couldn't be an ally this time.

"Look, this doesn't need to be difficult," Hawks said. "Just stand down. We can talk about this."

The make-shift (and horribly broken) studio would be a terrible place for a fight. It was too close to the buildings around it for Shouto to really let loose. He needed to find some *space.*

"Vigilantes, Shouto?" Fatgum sounded betrayed. "I *know* you're better than this." Shouto felt a prickle of irritation. Fatgum didn't know anything about him. He'd been a fine mentor for his friends, but Momo had advised that he was a little but too 'old guard' to understand the modern need for the vigilante network.

Too idealistic.

"You wouldn't understand," Shouto said, shifting his right foot back. Hawks tensed warily.

They were too far from the ocean to use that as a stage. None of the nearby parks were big enough for Shouto's brand of *Plus Ultra.* And UA was... well. Not an option.

"Try us, kid," Hawks said. "We don't need to fight. You don't need to make this worse for yourself."

Shouto looked up at the low ceiling of cloud.

Hmmm.

"You keep talking like the outcome of a fight is inevitable," Shouto said. "Are you really so sure you can win?"

And Shouto speared into the sky on a pillar of ice.

"No!" Hawks yelled. He was quickly obscured by the dense cloud, but not before Shouto saw him leap into the air. He would need to work quickly. With this much moisture in the air it was child's play to form a framework of ice in every direction. Shouto swiftly skated away from the central pillar.

Red feathers shrieked up through the air. Shouto barely dodged one of the bigger ones. They punched holes through his ice structure, making it creak ominously. Hawks himself came screaming up the central pillar, a dark shape blurred in the fog.

"Shouto!" Hawks yelled. Shouto frowned. So *familiar*; like a parent calling in a wayward child. They weren't taking him seriously at all.

"My name is *Scandal!*" Shouto shouted. Hawks whirled in his direction, a volley of feathers slicing through the air toward him. Shouto let himself fall out of the way and slid around behind him. Shouto crouched, concentrating on dropping the temperature.

Suddenly the structure shuddered with a deep bell-like tone. Deep cracks spread along the part of the central pillar that Shouto could see.

Someone was hammering the base.

More hits swiftly followed, gaining momentum as the ice started breaking apart. Shouto frantically strengthened the structure around him, but without the connection to the ground the whole thing was going to come down.

Every feather Hawks could spare swirled around Shouto. He couldn't see Hawks, but the feathers were moving unerringly closer.

Shouto wondered how much weight they could hold.

Working quickly, he spun a platform of ice out over the surrounding feathers, encasing them as he

went. The central pillar gave a final crack and started falling away, but the ice Shouto stood on remained in the air.

(This was going to make a mess of the city below)

Still trailing ice behind him, Shouto retreated away from where he'd last seen the winged hero. The temperature continued to drop around him. Pure instinct had Shouto ducking under a long red blade as Hawks made a sudden reappearance.

Shouto blocked the next swing with an ice-encrusted arm. Hawks bore his weight down on him. Shouto flared his left side and Hawks was forced to retreat.

Sweat crystalized on the winged hero's brow.

"Stop this," Hawks said. *"Please."*

"Does asking nicely often win you fights?" Shouto taunted. Hawks growled back at him.

"You were a good hero! You *are* a good hero! Why are you *doing* this?" Hawks asked. He was panting now. Shouto frowned. His stomach dropped as the ice platform suddenly lost a little elevation. Hawks grit his teeth and stabilized it.

Oh. *He was struggling to keep them airborne.*

"I am a good hero," Shouto said, standing at ease. "That's *exactly* why I had to do it."

"But... Vigilantes! There's no *regulation.* Nothing to stop you from going too far," Hawks argued.

"We have an ethics committee," Shouto said defensively. Hawks stared at him incredulously.

"Does the hero system mean nothing to you?" Hawks asked. "Is this all some... stunt? A joke?"

"The hero system *is a joke!"* Shouto yelled. "Open your damn *eyes!* From the moment I graduated, nothing has been what I was promised."

"We keep the peace!" Hawks argued. "We *protect-"*

"You protect the wrong people!" Shouto screamed. "Ten minutes ago I was doing a god damned *interview* with a criminal one hundred times over and three heroes come to arrest *me!* How many innocents need to suffer that... that *violent buffoon* before he's considered something other than *entertainment?"*

"Mistakes were made with Balloon Time. I know what happened with Deku was-"

"This isn't about Deku! Deku has to play by the rules because nobody believes he *can.* Meanwhile, people are disappearing and nobody cares because they don't consider them people *worth protecting!"* Shouto roared.

Snow started to drift onto the platform. The air had cooled significantly since they started. Hawks shuddered. The platform shuddered with him.

"Missing persons reports are *down,* Shouto! What are you talking about?"

Shouto laughed. He couldn't curb the bitter edge to it. This was probably the most honest conversation he'd had in years. Usually he had to keep it together, but everything was falling apart now. He could afford to let the mask show a few cracks.

"There are less reports because the definition of what a person *is* keeps *shrinking*," Shouto said. Hawks looked stricken for a moment before hardening his expression.

"Whatever you're trying to prove, this is the wrong way to do it," Hawks said. He made a gesture and the platform they were standing on shattered.

He hadn't been struggling with the weight, he'd been trying to break free.

Shouto reeled back, feet kicking at lumps of ice but finding no purchase. Red feathers caught Shouto before he could fall, suspending him awkwardly by the armpits. "It's over," Hawks said, hovering in front of him. "Come quietly. If you cooperate, people will be more inclined to listen. Go through the *proper* channels."

Shouto glared at him through the steady snow. *This wasn't over yet. He could do better.*

"No," said Shouto, and he released an inferno into the cloud above. Hawks reared back, but the attack wasn't aimed at him. Instead, the snow warmed to rain. Barely. And began falling in sheets.

Freezing everything it struck.

Shouto lifted his arms and slipped between the feathers as a distracted Hawks tried to escape the freezing rain. Shouto plummeted, frantically forming ice to try and reach the ground before he did. If he could control his fall he would be fine.

Suddenly his ice caught on something. He was far too high up for it to be the ground, but it was *solid.* Shouto hit the ice with a grunt, breath knocked out of him. He quickly extended the surface so he wouldn't slide off, forming a lip to catch him before the edge. As he caught his breath a shadow loomed over him.

"You have to stop," Rocklock said, foot coming to rest on Shouto's chest.

"I can't," Shouto said, bringing a hand to Rocklock's ankle. "You know I can't."

"There are boulders of ice falling on the city below," Rocklock said, leaning forward. "Fatgum has been doing his best, but he can't catch everything. You're going to hurt someone."

Shouto thumped his head back, closing his eyes. "I have to give them more time," he said. "I need to delay the heavy hitters to give them *time.* The more focus on me, the less on everyone else."

"I'm not going to let you destroy the city just to cause a distraction," Rocklock said. "Look, kid, you've had a good run, but they know about the network now. It's over."

"I failed them," Shouto said.

"No, you did your best," Rocklock said. "They'll know that."

"I need to give them more time," Shouto said, meeting Rocklock's glare. "As long as I can still fight I can buy them that."

Rocklock gave a pained sigh and ran a hand down his face. He glared at Shouto a little harder.

"Look. You know I can't help you directly. I have people I need to protect."

Shouto gave a stiff nod. "So do I."

"But. If you come quietly, I will stay with you, and try to rope in Fatgum as a guard. You've

already knocked Hawks out of the sky. That's three heroes out of the immediate fight. Will that be enough?" Rocklock said.

"Never enough," Shouto said, "But more than I probably deserve." Shouto lifted a hand. "Alright, how do you want to do this?"

Rocklock grinned.

Rocklock's idea of a controlled descent was... *not* . They wrestled and fought and rolled out of the sky, landing roughly where they'd begun in the ruined studio. Rocklock pinned Shouto with a piece of rubble and stepped back. Manzo was still filming while Yumena urgently narrated the scene. It took Balloon Time a solid thirty seconds to register what he was seeing.

"No, Scandal, *you're* under arrest!" Balloon Time said, and he started laughing. Shouto closed his eyes.

God damn.

Toru dropped all four expensive takeaway coffees. She ignored the angry muttering as the café patrons parted around her passive aggressively. She only had eyes for the tv. The feed had been interrupted, but she'd seen enough.

She needed to get Hitoshi and Aizawa out *now*.

Chapter End Notes

Why is Ochako so fun to write!? Why does Balloon Time keep showing up!

Why isn't there a writing guide to tell me how to write this very specific fic. Everything is all 'rising action' and 'show don't tell' but I just want to know how to balance Shouto against the plot. Is that too much to ask???

When in doubt, add melodrama.

(even in the author's note)

Also if the spell check had its way:

Ochako = Chaco
Monoma = Monomer
Shouto = Shout
Yumena = Yemeni
Deku = Deke
Nedzu = Needs
Izuku = lizuka

You know who doesn't trip the spell check? Friggen'... BALLOON TIME. Oh, and Aoyama for some reason.

Originally I wasn't going to make a whole fight scene. And then I'm like... this is a fighting anime. Give Shouto some spot light. The chapter got away from me.

Sinking Ship

Chapter Summary

Everyone takes Scandal's advice and gtfo.

Chapter Notes

Not as happy with this chapter, but i think last chapter is hard to follow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This day, Izuku decided, was actually a nightmare.

Monoma, Kendo and Nedzu were pouring over a map of the city. Izuku had been filling in the safe house knowledge gap between them (one thousand, three hundred and fourteen safe houses, who knew, he did remember them all) and were talking strategy. Nedzu had taken a step back from needling Monoma into apoplexy and had settled into discussing evacuation strategy.

Izuku waited for them to notice the obvious.

They'd given themselves five minutes to panic after Shouto's announcement. (And wasn't that a kick in the teeth; Shouto arrested. All because Izuku wasn't moving on this fast enough. They'd lost so much already, and what did they have to show for it?)

"There's no way to get everyone out of the city fast enough," Kendo said. "These safe houses are too densely placed, and any of them could be targeted."

"There's no way they have the manpower to be able to hit all of them at once," Monoma argued. "There's got to be a way through."

"We don't know their movements. We need to plan as though they do have a simultaneous operation," said Nedzu. "So what are our options?"

"Well there's always the sewers," Kendo said.

"Which could very easily box us in. If they are expecting a mass exodus, they will likely have eyes on the more obvious routes," said Nedzu. "But still, it's an option."

"Luckily, we don't need to move upwards of seven hundred people. Most will just be able to go home, return to their day jobs. The vigilante network isn't a full time job. Unfortunately, the ones who don't have that option are also the most noticeable," said Monoma.

Aizawa and Shinsou were fugitives. Their faces were plastered everywhere. They would be reliant on the network to lay low. Now they had lost that advantage. *(Good job, Izuku)*

"We don't need to get them out of the city, necessarily, so much as make sure they aren't caught in a safe house," Kendo said. "We could just work on helping them hide rather than flee."

"An excellent point!" agreed Nedzu. "Going to ground might be a better strategy. What we need is a staging ground. Somewhere we can organize the people, maybe set up a buddy system. Set the people who have nowhere to go with those who do."

"Where are you thinking?" Kendo asked.

"Something like UA. Defensible, plenty of space, no safe hou- why are you all making those faces?" Nedzu asked.

"UA isn't safe," Monoma said.

"So I've heard,' Nedzu said. "But no one has so far elaborated. In fact, everyone has remained *emphatically* silent on the topic."

Oh dear. Izuku had forgotten about *that* little land mine.

"It's... uh... not really a good time to say?" Kendo tried.

"Well, you. You aren't going to like it?" Izuku said.

"Midoriya! I think it's time you stop trying to spare my feelings and give me some useful data," Nedzu snapped.

Oh boy.

"Uh, well," Izuku cleared his throat. "It's the new principal?"

"I am not so delicate as to expire at the thought of someone filling my old job," Nedzu said. Izuku winced.

"Um. It's more about... who it is..." Izuku muttered.

"A Mr. Junsei Gimei, it's not like I didn't look it up," Nedzu said sharply. "What?"

"Junsei Gimei is a cover," Kendo said.

"We looked into it before. Tried to determine if he could be useful to the network," said Monoma.

"So he knows about the network? And what, can't be relied on? UA is huge, he can't possib-" Nedzu started to say.

"He used to work for Ankokudzura Labs!" Izuku shouted. The room went silent. "Sorry," Izuku tacked on.

It was funny how there had been silence in the room before but it was only now that Izuku was noticing the clocks. Analogue ones. They would completely obscure a pin from dropping. Izuku still found himself holding his breath.

"Anko... labs..." Nedzu whispered. "But I... I *buried* them. Who...?" Nedzu's throat clicked as he swallowed. Izuku couldn't even imagine what he was thinking. Izuku didn't like facing his own past, and he had nothing on Nedzu. Izuku had at least grown up with his mom. Nedzu had had... Ankokudzura Labs.

"Yeah well you missed a spot," Monoma said. Izuku flinched. There was a thump as Kendo presumably smacked his arm.

"I'm sorry," Izuku said again.

"Who is it? Who is he really?" Nedzu asked quietly. The hair on Izuku's arms raised.

"Dr. Aku," Monoma said blithely. Nedzu barked a laugh.

"I don't... I don't even know why I asked. *They never bothered to tell me their names* . I..." Nedzu was quiet for a minute. He cleared his throat. "So... UA is off our list of options. What else?"

Izuku would be reeling from the whiplash if he wasn't already standing in a pit of guilt. As it was, Nedzu's stoic response steadied Izuku a little. If Nedzu could move on from that, Izuku could stand to be a little brave.

Izuku raised his hand.

" *Oh for fuck's sake,* we're not in school," Monoma griped. "Just spit it out."

Monoma being an asshole was oddly bracing.

"You've been marking down the locations of the safe houses on that map, right?" Izuku asked.

"Right," said Kendo.

"Well there should be a big blank spot, maybe a couple kilometers wide?"

"That's in the middle of the city. Too densely populated to hide easily," Kendo said.

"Yeah but... there's not going to be any hero patrols. They'll all be searching the safe houses. And in the center... is Kacchan's agency," said Izuku. Everyone forgot about Ground Zero's agency. He wasn't sure why, it was hard to miss.

A beat of silence.

"And you think it would be big enough?" Kendo asked.

"Oh, you know, only the best for Kacchan," Izuku said lightly. *And somehow, it was never enough* .

"He's the number three hero," Monoma said. "You think he's really going to help us?"

"Kacchan is a hero. He'll help everyone," Izuku said. And he would! *He would.*

It's just that... *everyone* didn't always include Izuku.

"So then Kacchan said he wouldn't be late if the meeting locations weren't so far out of the way," Izuku whispered to Nedzu. "And Shouto said 'ok' and avoided all locations within a one kilometer radius of his agency."

Nedzu chuckled.

"Shouto is a petty man," Izuku chuckled. "You should have seen it."

"Yes, I should have," Nedzu agreed. He was tucked in the front of Izuku's jacket, braced against

one of Izuku's arms. They were riding one of the empty evening trains into the heart of the city. Nedzu had been oddly clingy since leaving Kendo's. His tail was firmly wrapped around Izuku's ribs and he hadn't been keen to poke his nose out of Izuku's jacket more than necessary.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" Izuku asked.

"A little late for doubt now," Nedzu said. Izuku nodded.

Monoma had been part of the last minute contingent of heroes called in for the safe house raids. He would be able to coordinate with Kendo on their movements, at least for his portion of the operation. They would be able to sweep for stragglers and send people into the city center.

Kendo had the idea to rope the ethics committee in communications. She'd gone armed with their favorite snacks and promised to meet up with them again at Ground Zero's agency.

All Izuku had to do was get there.

It seemed Shouto's announcement had well and truly made a mess of the planned raids. The heroes were scrambling to organize before everyone went to ground and the city was roiling with it. Reports of what was actually going on were conflicting. Legitimate journalists were lost in a sea of civilian speculation (some of which was maliciously generated).

Izuku just had to trust Kacchan would be busy enough wrangling a failing operation. Izuku would be in and out of the agency before he was noticed.

Make contact. Throw himself into the next task. Get out.

Keep moving.

Izuku had to consciously stop his leg from jittering.

Luckily the turmoil in the city didn't affect how the train ran. Izuku and Nedzu were soon out in the night air, running up and along the rooftops to remain out of sight. It was strange how quiet it was with a war raging just under the surface. But then, the vigilante network wasn't trying to fight back.

Just hide.

Once up in the canopy of the city, Nedzu chose to run alongside him. Initially it threw Izuku off balance not having directions in his ear, but the two of them compensated quickly. It seemed Nedzu needed to work off some energy. It was surprisingly peaceful.

The Ground Zero agency was a bold piece of architecture. Izuku had been in it once before when it was initially set up. There had been an 'office warming' party and he and Shouto had decided to crash it.

Well, Shouto had. Izuku had gone along to make sure things didn't get out of hand.

(*That* hadn't gone as planned)

What he could remember of the building were the grand sweeping statements of glass and concrete. Lights that illuminated the night into submission. Tamed greenery falling in artful curtains. Desirable central location in the business district.

(Izuku worked out of a basement suite. The only time he saw the sun was when he needed to make a daylight appearance to keep from being pronounced dead, from slipping through the cracks. His

work-life balance was *patrolling with his friends.)*

Kacchaan had earned it. He was bold in everything he did, including breaking into the hero scene. He'd barely been a sidekick for six months before opening his own agency, staking claim on the heart of the city. The public adored his unapologetic approach to hero work. He'd soared up the ranks.

(Izuku had peaked at 57 with a sympathy vote his first year as a pro. He had to accept that any press was good press after that, and became known for his bloody smile.)

Kacchan had expanded his agency rapidly, hiring his high school friends, and even older pros. He dug out the floor beneath the agency and invested in state of the art gyms.

(Izuku had read about it in a magazine article while in hospital.)

Kacchan had started picking up higher profile cases. Cracking the top ten is harder than getting into the top hundreds.

(Izuku had been named 'most infamous hero' alongside a ranking of dangerous villains.)

Because Kacchan didn't know the meaning of the word 'chill', he also branched out quietly into vigilante operations. It wasn't well known, even among the network, but it had been enough for Izuku to quietly take a step back from Shouto's operations.

(Even though Shouto hadn't seemed to notice Izuku's involvement at all.)

Now Nedzu and Izuku were crouched on an opposing rooftop. Nedzu was regarding the building and Izuku was ducked out of sight.

"The doors are alarmed," Izuku said. "But the basement is an addition to the building. There might be a way to slip in through the parking structure."

"Or," said Nedzu. "We go in through the front."

"What?"

"Kouda is sitting right out front talking to a raven," said Nedzu. He sounded amused. "Unless, of course, you think we might have an issue with Kouda?"

"Oh. No. Kouda's fine," Izuku muttered. Nudzu ruffled his hair, taking his place on Izuku's shoulders as he rolled to his feet.

"Onward, valiant steed!" Nedzu cheered, kicking him with his heels. It seemed Nedzu was confident in their safety. For Izuku, the hard part was just about to begin.

"You don't have to make it weird, sir," Izuku said.

"Too late!" Nedzu chuckled as Izuku picked his way down the fire escape. Nedzu assured him the streets were empty as they made their way to a quietly whispering Kouda.

"Eep!" came a quiet voice. Izuku stopped and waved half heartedly.

"Hey Kouda, I-"

"Principal Nedzu!" Kouda squeaked. Nedzu laughed. "You're ok! This is... this is amazing!"

"I am, I am!" Nedzu said. "I hear you have all been busy while I was away. President of the ethics committee, eh? I'm proud of you."

"Ah... I wouldn't say *president* ," Kouda said softly. "More like... liaison?"

The raven said 'Took took'.

"Ah, Deku," Kouda said. "You look... alive? I am very glad you're alive."

"Thank you," Izuku said. "Kouda-"

"Ah! You probably want to go inside? We shouldn't stay out here. I was just trying to see if this squirrel would do better with some fresh air," Kouda said.

" *That* does not look like a squirrel," said Nedzu.

"Um, it's a quirked animal of some sort. I just thought the tail kind of looked like a squirrel," said Kouda.

"If a squirrel didn't have eyes, ears, nose, mouth..." Nedzu said.

"He has a mouth! And teeth! *Lots of teeth* . But yeah... he's mostly fur. I don't think he can hear me, can you, little guy?" Kouda asked. "I think he might be sick. He won't eat anything."

"Sounds like the creepiest squirrel I've ever heard of," Izuku said. "Ah, sorry! I don't mean any offense."

"I think he's pretty cute," said Kouda. "He's mostly just fur."

"And teeth," said Nedzu.

"Ah well, the raven brought him to me. They thought I might be able to help him, but I'm not having much luck. Let's go inside?"

Kacchan's agency probably smelled expensive, though Izuku couldn't tell over the residual stale smoke in his hair and clothes. Izuku bet he looked out of place. Kouda led them down out of sight into one of the many subterranean rooms. Izuku could navigate fairly well on his own with a hand on a wall, but Nedzu kept guiding him anyway. (*So cute!* Kouda had squealed, nearly throwing Izuku into a roll and two left turns. His voice was pitched way too close to Nedzu's squeaks)

"I guess we should be expecting more people to show up?" Kouda asked.

"Yeah, this is probably our best bet for a base of operation. Now that it's dark out I think we'll see more people show up," Izuku said.

"I should probably go watch the door so no one tries to break in," Kouda said.

Izuku did *not* blush. "Probably for the best," he mumbled.

Kouda left them in one of the rest areas. (Plump couches, stocked snacks, plenty of things to trip over). Izuku collapsed onto one of the plush couches with a sigh. Nedzu relinquished his seat on his shoulders to start making tea. One of Izuku's toes started tapping.

(Kacchan was going to be so mad if he found him here, stinking up his couch.)

Ceramic clinked as Nedzu delivered a hot cup of tea. Izuku thanked him quietly and tried to calm

his nerves. He breathed in the steam, willing his heart to slow down. Gradually he forced himself to relax. Oddly, his pulse seemed to get louder, thudding strongly in his ears.

Almost like...

"Deku!" Kacchan yelled, slamming open the door.

Fuck! "Ah Kacchan! W-w-what are you doing here?" Izuku fumbled the tea, hissing as it burned him. He set it on the floor clumsily and shook his hands in an attempt to cool them. *Shit* , it burned!

"Are you freaking *kidding me?* You can't be here!" Kacchan said, stepping closer.

"W-w-we, uh, Kouda let us in!" Izuku said, rolling off the couch to put it between himself and a spitting-mad Ground Zero. He rammed his shin into some no-doubt expensive piece of ambiance and bit back a curse. Fuck!

"You need to leave, *now!"* Kacchan said.

"A-a-aren't you supposed to be out on the vigilante operation?" Izuku asked. God he could use some cold water right about now. His hands hurt. He blew on them gingerly.

"The operation is a fustercluck, thanks to your half-thawed ex. Everyone started jumping at shadows as night fell, attacking each other as much as any suspected vigilantes. They called it off," Kacchan growled.

"That was a respectable bit of theater, wasn't it?" said Nedzu, calm as could be. "I am glad I was able to catch it."

"Principal Nedzu," Kacchan said. It lacked the expected disbelief, awe or strangled emotion. It almost sounded... "Of-freaking-course you're here too."

"I am! Midoriya and I are a team!" Nedzu chirped. "Midoriya, catch!"

Something cool and wet was tossed onto his shoulder. A washcloth? He soothed his fingers against it.

"B-b-but aren't you number three now? Shouldn't you be included in coordinating next steps?" Izuku asked. He really needed to take a step back. Kacchaan was right, Izuku *shouldn't* be here, and he was just... being a terrible guest.

"It's just a number, Deku, not a freaking job description," Kacchan said.

Just a number , huh? Izuku's jaw tightened. Those 'numbers' had determined the quality of Izuku's life for twenty years.

Don't start Izuku...

Don't you dare.

"Oh?" Izuku said, like a fool, "Not a 'mantle of responsibility'? Something that 'confers an expectation of continued excellence'?"

Kacchan's acceptance speech had been... something.

"Shut up! What do you even know?" Kacchan shouted. It was a reflexive comeback, meaningless and thoughtless, but aggressive. Somehow it still hit like a personal attack.

"Oh, *nothing* , I'm sure! I was 'gone before my time', after all!" Izuku said. *God, it was like scratching an itch.* He needed to *stop* .

"What do you *want* from me?" Kacchan roared.

"It sounded like a fucking *eulogy!"* Izuku roared back. "You should have stuck with *'I'm gonna win'* because at least it was honest!"

"You want *honest* , Deku? Honest is you don't know *anything!"* Kacchan spat.

"What is there to know!?" Izuku asked. "You don't talk to me for five years and as soon as I'm forcibly retired it's all *'lest we forget'!"*

"Since when do *you* care so much about what I say?" Kacchan asked. "You never listened before, why start now!?"

"I don't care!" Izuku hissed. "I *don't* ."

Izuku's eyes burned with tears. Embarrassed, he ducked his head in the crook of his arm. He became uncomfortably aware of his harsh breathing in the silence. Nedzu hummed from the couch. Izuku had nearly forgotten about him. *God, Izuku was a mess.*

"Sorry sir," Izuku sniffed.

"Oh, don't mind me," said Nedzu. Izuku felt sixteen again. A hand towel suddenly flopped over Izuku's shoulder.

"Clean yourself up," Kacchan said gruffly. Izuku hid his face in the towel, ignoring the gritty sting in his fingers. Why couldn't he just handle things like an adult? He *was* an adult!

He barely had time to wipe his face before Nedzu said "Incoming." Then there was a squeak of shoes and a concerning 'thud'.

"Boss! *There* you are!" Kirishima said.

"What?" Kacchan asked.

"Oh my god, is that Deku?" Kirishima asked.

"Is it? I hadn't noticed," Kacchan said flippantly. *Like a switch had been flipped.*

"Why's he crying?" asked Kirishima, sounding concerned. Izuku ducked his head into the towel.

"My acceptance speech moved him to tears," Kacchan said dryly.

"Kacchan!" Izuku spluttered.

"Oh I know, right!? It was so professional! But it was a little obvious that he didn't write it himself." Kirishima said.

What the *actual* ...

"He... didn't?" Izuku asked. Great. Something that had been easy to articulate and be angry about wasn't even Kacchan's fault. Since when had Kacchan let anyone interfere with his image? Especially for such an important event.

"Could you imagine? It was so polite! And he got through the whole thing. Proud of you, man," Kirishima said with feeling. Kacchan scoffed.

"Why are you here?" Kacchan said. If Izuku didn't know any better, he almost sounded patient.

"Oh right! Well-"

Two more skidding 'thuds' and the room felt crowded. Did extra people increase the barometric pressure or was Izuku just losing it?

"Deku!" Ashido cried. "Is he staying for the sleepover? I haven't seen you in years! I cried so much when I heard you were dead. I'm so glad you're alive!"

"Get off me!" Kaminari complained. "Deku! I'd say it's good to see you if someone would budge over."

"A-a-ashido? Kaminari?" Izuku said, hoping the stutter hid the waver in his voice. A keyed up Kaminari would explain a certain level of presence.

"You were wicked on Yumena's show!" Kaminari said, suddenly closer.

"Oh my god, how did you pull that off?" Ashido said, closer still. She must have elbowed Kaminari on her way over going by the quiet 'oof'. Izuku tried to back up but he was already at the wall.

"You don't just rush a blind guy, brats. I can't take you anywhere," Kacchan growled. There was a scuffle and slide as Kacchan presumably dragged them away. "Give the man some space, you preschoolers."

"Yes *Dad* ," said Ashido, "Oh god, Principal Nedzu?"

"It's me!" cheered Nedzu. Ashido's giggle was watery.

"Where have you been!" wailed Kaminari.

"So this is where everyone went," came the cool voice of Jirou. "Midoriya, Principal Nedzu, it's been too long." She had always had the gift of understatement.

"Where's stooge number five?" Kacchan asked.

"He's taken the front entrance, ostensibly to process paperwork from the 'raids'," Jirou said. "But also we had to stop five people from trying to pry open one of the doors in the parking garage. Koji missed them because he's distracted with his weird squirrel."

"Seriously, that squirrel is *so weird!"* Ashido said.

"Clingwrap is my new favorite," Kacchan announced. Kaminari and Ashido protested in the manner of preschool children. "No whining! He's the only one doing something sensible."

"We're off duty!" Ashido protested.

"And this is why you're all sidekicks," Kacchan said. "Now get out of here, the adults are talking."

"But... *reunion!"* said Ashido.

"And *I'm* an adult," added Kaminari.

"There's popsicles in the freezer," Kacchan said, deadpan.

"Which freezer!?" demanded Kaminari.

"What are you asking me for!?" Kacchan said.

"I see what you're doing, but it's going to work anyway," said Ashido. "I'll catch you later, Deku, Mr. Principal!" Ashido and Kaminari were not quiet leaving the room. It sounded like finding popsicles was a full contact sport.

"Are there *really* popsicles?" asked Kirishima doubtfully.

"You calling me a liar?" Kaachan said.

"I'll be right back," said Kirishima.

"Popsicles? Really?" Jirou asked after Kirishima had left.

"He never actually told me why he was here," Kacchan said. "What do *you* want?"

"Just want to check where you want to put everyone," Jirou said succinctly. Kacchan huffed a sigh.

"Just keep them out of any sensitive areas. And out of sight! I'll deal with Ashido's concerning 'sleepover' insinuation later," Kacchan grumbled. Here was Izuku's exclusive insider look at the number three's agency and it felt just like the dorm situation all over again. *Nothing really changed, did it?*

"Sure thing, boss," Jirou said.

"Actually, I was hoping to get a look at your facilities," said Nedzu. Izuku felt a welling of hope. It might be easier to get out of this confrontation than he thought!

"Ears can give you the tour while I talk to Deku," Kacchan said, destroying all of Izuku's hopes and dreams.

What else was new?

"Actually, I-" Izuku said.

"We're not done here yet," Kacchan said.

"I'm *plenty done,"* Izuku snapped.

"I'm not," Kacchan said.

It's always about you, isn't it, Kacchan?

"I really don't think-" Nedzu started.

"He'lll be fine for ten minutes, alright? Keep your tail on. We just need to talk, I'll bring him to you after," Kacchan said.

"Midoriya?" Nedzu asked. Oh look, someone giving him an actual option! Like he was a thinking person who could make his own decisions. What a novel concept.

The problem was, Izuku had a fairly strong grasp on the distinction between what he wanted to do,

and the right thing to do. What he wanted to do was throw everything in Kacchan's face and avoid him for the next five years. What he should do was find out what was so important that Kacchan wanted to have a conversation more than a fight.

"I'll be fine," Izuku conceded. "I'll come find you after. Somehow."

Nedzu sprung from whatever surface he'd been climbing and Izuku had to suppress an instinctive roll. Whiskers tickled his ear.

"It's not only up to you to handle this. Whatever *this* is," Nedzu said. Nedzu had always been wary of the baggage between the two of them. He couldn't understand Izuku's insistence on burying it, especially when the uglier emotions started showing through his mask. To be fair, Izuku barely understood it himself. "You are not alone, Midoriya."

"Right. Right. Ok." Izuku took a big breath. None of this was actually a big deal, he was just getting emotional. All too soon Nedzu had hopped down and left with Jirou, leaving Izuku alone with his old... something.

"You really care about them, don't you," Izuku said.

"They're domesticated boneheads. They'd never survive in the wild now," Kacchan said.

Was that a joke? It was almost *friendly* .

"Sit down, nerd, and stop flinching. I'm not going to attack you," Kacchan said.

"Right, right," Izuku said, shuffling forward and reaching to find the couch. Izuku fumbled back onto the couch and he heard Kacchan flop down onto something soft.

"You really are blind, aren't you," Kacchan said. Izuku bristled.

"I hadn't noticed. I thought everyone was just keeping the lights off to save energy," Izuku said.

"Don't start! You're *completely* blind!" Kacchan said.

"Is this the start of an 'I told you so speech' because I-"

"You can barely navigate a ten by ten room! How did you manage to get across the city without being noticed!? Do you have any idea how danger-"

"Danger? I don't even *know her,"* Izuku said.

"I'm serious," Kacchan growled.

"And I'm Izuku," Izuku said blandly. "What is the point of all this? I know you think very little of me, but I have noticed I can't see. There are still things I need to do."

"There are limits to what you can do," Kacchan said.

"Haven't found them yet," Izuku muttered. "I'll let you know when I do."

"You'll be *dead."*

"So what would you have me do? Go home and lock the door?" Izuku asked.

"Yes!"

"I'll just go return Nedzu to Veteran affairs, pick up whatever person they've assigned to me and live a quiet little life that doesn't offend anyone," Izuku said.

"Obviously don't *return him,"* Kacchan said.

"Oh they were quite insistent. Showed up to my house and everything," Izuku said.

"Don't go home, then! Hide."

"Where!? One of Shouto's safe houses? Hideout in a hotel using the bundle of cash I made as a quirkless hero? *My mom's house so I can drag her into this?* "

"I don't know! Not here. Here is the *worst* place you could be! Why did you have to come *here?"* Kacchan demanded.

Afraid I'll embarrass you Kacchan?

"I wasn't exactly spoilt for choice. If it makes you feel any better, I was planning to be out of here before you got back. I don't want to be here any more than you want me here."

"Then leave!"

Wow. Izuku was a little surprised how much that hurt, even if he was expecting it. Here he was in mortal danger and Kacchan wanted to kick him out on the street. Izuku took a grounding breath. Dealing with people who hated him was his bread and butter. He had tools for this.

"Once I speak to Mr. Aizawa and Hitoshi I'll be out of here," Izuku said. Calmly. "You won't even have to-"

"Sensei?" Kacchan said breathlessly. "He's here?"

"Not yet, I think, but I'm sure he'll show up soon."

"But... How? Why would *you* plan to meet *here?* " Kacchan asked.

"I wouldn't call it a plan," Izuku said. "More like the only available option. He's not exactly spoilt for choice either, being a fugitive."

"It *was* him then," Kacchan said. "He kidnapped a civilian! What's going on?"

"Well, you'll be able to ask him yourself," said Izuku.

"Why is everyone showing up here? This is the center of the city, the most populated part. It makes no sense," Kacchan said.

"It's in the middle of a safe-house dead zone. All the heroes are patrolling the outskirts."

"Dead zone? Are you- *that bastard did it on purpose!"* Kacchan growled. "I thought he was just saying things."

Ah, sorry Shouto. Secret's out.

"Something like that," Izuku said. "Anyway, as much as it bothers you, this is the safest place to be right now. No matter how you feel about me."

"This isn't about feelings, this is about *keeping you alive,"* Kacchan said.

"I can take care of myself," said Izuku.

"You can rig a fight, but not everyone is going to let you off on a technicality. Your tricks-"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand! I know how to recognize the best option, no matter how distasteful it is, this is *survival!"* Izuku said.

"You think I don't know about survival? If I screw up even once, all of this goes away! I have to be perfect or we all lose," Kacchan yelled.

"If I fuck up, i lose my *life* . If you fuck up you lose a *lease!* It's not comparable in the least," Izuku said.

"It's not a lease, it's my people. Without my rank, I can't protect them."

"We all know I'm not one of yours, Kacchan. Why are you acting like you care so much?"

"I *don't* care,"

"Yeah, I know. That's kind of my point," said Izuku

"Fu-No! That's not what I mean. I. I *care* . Why are you so... so *infuriating!?* I'm trying to keep you safe," Kacchan said.

"If I was in the habit of taking your advice I would have ended up dead a long time ago," Izuku said angrily.

And then realized exactly what he had said.

" *Fuck* , that's not what I meant. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. Just.. please forget it," Izuku said. He of all people knew how much a stray word could hurt. His frustration was no excuse!

Across from him, he heard Kacchan get to his feet.

"I have people to see to," said Kacchan, moving away.

"Kacchan, wait! Please. I'm sorry," Izuku felt along the couch and took a couple steps of faith to the door.

"Don't back down now, it's the first honest thing you said to me all day," Kacchan said. It didn't sound like he was getting any further away. Izuku slid along the door and heard footsteps as Kacchan backed into (presumably) the hall.

"No, it's. Th-th-that wasn't..." Izuku protested. He followed along, one hand on the wall, as Kacchan retreated. He hoped the hallway was clear. Or that Kacchan might warn him before he hit something.

Might be a little too much to ask for now.

"Deku," Kacchan growled.

"No. It's. Please stop. Just... *listen* -"

"Look. I told you to leave, you won't. I tried. We have bigger things to deal with now than beating sense through your thick skull," Kacchan said.

Ah yes. When Kacchan decided a conversation was over, it was *over* . Izuku sighed heavily.

"Sure. Whatever you say," Izuku said instead of something inspired like 'Yes, Kacchan, you paragon of light and reason'.

What followed was the most awkward tour of a building ever. Kacchan quickly tired of Izuku fumbling about with the walls and grabbed Izuku's shoulder. He then learned of Izuku's newfound punch reflex to physical contact.

Turned out Kacchan's reflex to being punched was to *punch back.*

The ensuing wrestling match ended with Kacchan twisting Izuku's arm behind his back. He didn't let go until they came to a popular room, judging by the muffled yelling. Kacchan threw the door open and screamed at everyone to shut up.

"There you are, boss!" said Kirishima cheerfully. "Look who we found!"

"Were you fighting!?" squeaked Nedzu. Kacchan dropped Izuku's arm quickly. Izuku massaged the blood back into the area.

"I'm okay," Izuku said through the bleeding nose.

"Just a misunderstanding," Kacchan "Nobody grab Deku unless you want a black eye."

"Then why is he the one with a bloody nose?" drawled Aizawa. Izuku was thrilled to hear his voice again.

"Hitoshi?" Izuku called hopefully.

"Izu, what the fuck," Hitoshi said obligingly. "Let's get you cleaned up. I am not having a conversation with you until you're not in danger of fainting from blood loss."

"It's not that bad!" Izuku protested.

"It kind of is," said Toru.

"Toru! How are you!" Izuku asked. Oh he'd been worried about his friends. He felt dizzy with relief.

Or the bloody nose. Could be the nose.

"No. We're going to the bathroom," Hitoshi said.

"Children!" barked Aizawa. The room went silent. "Izuku go do something about your face. We'll debrief when you get back."

"Thanks Sensei," Izuku said.

Just as Hitoshi opened a door for Izuku, he was bowled over by someone soft and familiar.

"Deku!" Ochako cried. "Ugh you're bleeding!" She hurriedly let go. Something jingled suspiciously. Izuku made a grab for it, catching her wrist on the third try.

"Ocha, are these handcuffs? *Were you arrested?* " Izuku demanded. He knew she'd risked too much helping him!

"Don't worry about it!" she said in a suspiciously upbeat manner. Then she laughed.

Izuku worried.

Chapter End Notes

Bakugou Katsuki; single father of five.

Ah. Bakugou is hard to write. I struggled to try and capture some of his character, but he's much more likely to shut down a conversation than have one. I gave up and decided to go with whatever felt snappiest.

Now I have to write a group conversation. This is going to get long fast. Chapter count goes up to 31!!

A Huddle of Heroes

Chapter Summary

I bet you can guess there's more talking in this chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku was gently simmering, slowly approaching boil. Hitoshi was dabbing at his face with a damp cloth. He was being gentle and careful, at complete odds with his angry tone.

"You said you would be my backup, Izu," Hitoshi said. "I was counting on you."

"Hitoshi, I-"

"You *ran off* to get *barbequed,"* Hitoshi said, applying firm pressure to the bridge of Izuku's nose. The resulting tears stung his other cuts. He probably looked like a complete mess. "You still stink like smoke."

"Blackout left," Izuku hissed. He didn't think his nose was broken, but it was hard to tell with all the pain. "It was supposed to be in and out. Nothing complicated."

"This whole thing was already complicated!" Hitoshi hissed. He jerked his hand and something popped in Izuku's nose. Oh, it *had* been broken. Izuku tried his best to stifle a whimper. "I am *so mad* at you."

"We did what we had to!" Izuku said. *This was so unfair.* Nobody wanted to be in this situation, but they had to play the cards as dealt. Izuku was making the best of a bad job, why did everyone feel like they had the right to jump down his throat about it? "Nothing is ideal here, we had to make a bold move!"

"And what do you have to show for it?" Hitoshi demanded. His fingers were gentle as they wiped away the excess blood. Izuku batted his hand away.

"Hitoshi, we don't get to play it safe. It was still the best call at the time," Izuku said. *God, everyone was on his case today! It was aggravating.* Hitoshi tried to dab at his face again. "That's enough! I can do it myself." Izuku held out a hand for the cloth.

"I'm not done, you insufferable *child,"* Hitoshi hissed. "Hold still."

"Make me," Izuku said.

"Why are you so infuriating!?" Hitoshi asked. Izuku quirked his lips.

"You're the second person to ask me that today," Izuku said. He waited for the foggy loss of control but it never materialized. Izuku frowned.

"Don't give me that look. You're in too much pain for it to work, and I'm not letting you get out of this that easy," Hitoshi said. Izuku winced as the washcloth came back to dab at his face.

"It's not that bad," Izuku protested.

"Yeah, it *is* that bad. And I'm really concerned about how... *flippant* you are with blowing me off! That was a massive risk, Izu," Hitoshi said.

"Why does everyone think it's their business how much risk I take on? It's my life!"

"Oh my god-!" Hitoshi started. The door was flung open and a breathless Kirishima arrived.

"Here you guys are!" he gasped.

"What does the goblin king want now?" Hitoshi inquired mildly. "Hasn't he done enough damage?"

"Uh, the boss is really sorry about that," Kirishima said.

Izuku snorted. Warmth dribbled from his nose in a renewed stream.

"No! We *just* stopped the bleeding," Hitoshi protested. Paper towel was shoved under his nose. "Hold this."

Izuku held.

"Well... I'm sorry, anyway," said Kirishima.

"So what do you want, then?" Hitoshi asked.

"Uh, I just wanted to check on you. See if you need anything?" Kirishima said.

"I'm not going to steal his soaps or back up a toilet in revenge or anything," Izuku said. "You can tell his highness I'll be out of his space soon enough."

"No, that's not..." Kririshima sighed. "I. He's just been... It's a tough time, you know? He's not himself."

"He seemed plenty in character to me," muttered Izuku.

"But it's not... You've not seen him. He's been on edge and angry-"

"Still not *seeing* the difference," Izuku snapped.

"Are you seriously cracking blind jokes right now?" Hitoshi asked.

"I do what I want, 'Tosh."

"But this is what I mean! It's just... more. Usually he can control his temper. He yells a lot, sure, but-"

"I don't care! Does he even know you're here? I bet he doesn't. He hates when people apologize for him," Izuku said. "He hates apologizing in general."

"Please! Just," Kirishima said. "He won't talk to me. He won't talk to *anyone,* but there was a mission... I think it went bad. He's been off ever since."

"Then maybe his highness should see a therapist and stop taking it out on his friends," Hitoshi said.

"Pretty sure I don't rank as a friend, Hitoshi," Izuku said.

"Not everything is about you, Izu. *You'd* probably end up punched even in his best mood," Hitoshi said.

"This is slander," Izuku said dryly.

"Try being less punchable," Hitoshi muttered.

"Victim blaming!" Izuku said.

"Uh, I think... I'll just go? I'm sorry," Kirishima said. Izuku felt bad. He was just taking his irritation out on everyone around him. Talking sharply to Kirishima was like kicking a puppy; he was just so earnest. Also Izuku was curious about which mission was so bad that it would put Kacchan in a tailspin. He couldn't remember any lately.

(Kacchan's failures were bittersweet)

"Wait!" Izuku called. "Which mission?"

"It was that Aiko case. The kidnapping?" Kirishima said.

Izuku blinked. Moving his face *hurt,* but it was... that case...

"Wasn't that... wildly successful?" asked Hitoshi. "It made international news."

"He got a commendation for it," Izuku said. Even Izuku had felt begrudgingly happy for him. It had been good work.

"I think... I think he felt like he didn't earn it?" Kirishima told them. "And then he was announced number three and... well. You know what he's like when he doesn't feel like he earned something."

Izuku felt a flicker of rage. " *He saved a little girl!* With almost nothing to go on! It was a goddamn *miracle* and he's. He's."

God there were no words for the amount of arrogant assholery that went into *pouting about a case because...*

Because what? He didn't solve it the way he wanted? The method was unsatisfying? Maybe he wasn't able to punch the villain?

"I know it sounds bad, but-"

"Sounds bad!? It *is* bad!" Izuku raged.

"Yeah it's kinda bad, bro," Hitoshi said. Kirishima whimpered.

"I'm just... I'm just making this worse. Please, *please* don't mention it to him. I'll just... go," Kirishima said. The door clicked closed behind him.

"God, I feel sorry for him," Hitoshi said.

"Kirishima likes working for Kacchan though," Izuku said.

"No. I feel sorry that he's going to have to live through Murder Explosion's mood when you inevitably bring it up at the worst possible moment."

"Hey, I have tact!" Izuku felt like he should be offended.

"This is what I mean about a punchable face."

The conference room *gleamed.* It had been a long time since Nedzu had run a meeting, but he was pretty sure that it had never been in a room so grand. This room was built with every ounce of prestige the hero industry cultivated. One wall was a display screen, the one opposite a stylized rendition of explosions done in black and orange. Orange glass was used to highlight the piece and catch the lighting, making it look molten. Frosted glass walls made up the other two sides, leaving the room both private and airy.

Nedzu sat at the head of the table with a cup of tea. The table was made of wood polished to a mirror finish. Nedzu wasn't using a coaster. Bakugou avoided looking in Nedzu's direction, though with the blooming black eye it was hard to tell.

Kouda sat in one corner, trying to coax his little squirrel (?) friend to eat a piece of celery. The thing seriously gave Nedzu chills. Ashido and Kaminari fought over the last ice cream novelty in the box, refereed by Jirou. Although, it was probably more accurate to say she was egging them on and not actually helping. Sero was shuffling through paperwork and comparing it to something on his phone.

On the other side of the table Aizawa was guarding coffee number (?) from Uraraka's flying elbows as she retold her grand escape. Something about flipping a table, going by the hand motions. Yaoyarozu and presumably Toru (going by a tilted chair) listened in rapt attention. Uraraka had opted to keep her ill gotten bracelet, possibly for dramatic effect. Both ends were now closed about the same wrist.

Monoma and Kendo had opted to stand by the wall. They watched the general circus with smug amusement.

Nedzu was confident he was up to date with everyone's stories. He was just waiting now for Midoriya and Shinsou to return. There was really no point in starting to plan without Midoriya.

The glass door opened on the other side. Everyone paused their conversation to watch Kirishima sheepishly slink in. He gave a tight smile to no one in particular and took the closest chair. As attention left him, he put his elbows on the table and gripped his hair.

"Elbows," Bakugou snapped. Kirishima startled guiltily, folding his hands back on his lap.

"Sorry," he said.

"Where's the nerd?" Bakugou asked.

"Still, uh, bleeding? They'll be out soon I'm sure," Kirishima said.

Quietly, Nedzu fiddled with the console in front of him. They had a name now, after all. A face.

A target.

It wasn't hard to go from there to get a picture. An address. Properties. You could only obfuscate a money trail so much without cutting yourself off from it entirely. A little illicit digging showed that he hadn't been back to his apartment for a few days (so many innocent household gadgets had

such poor security) and several hotels had flagged as possible points of interest.

Nedzu was currently scrubbing through days worth of security footage of the most promising option. A record for delivery of a large number of televisions had piqued his interest.

But there was something off about-

The glass doors opened again. This time it was Midoriya and Shinsou. Midoriya's face had been firmly bandaged with puffy gauze and the remainder of his face scrubbed clean. Shinsou shot a glare at Bakugou as he led Midoriya to a seat. Nedzu thought it best to start the meeting before Shinsou said something fun.

"Welcome back! Now that we're all here we can start," Nedzu announced. "This is our target," he said, bringing up an image of Nagami Saki, aka Blackout, aka arrogant pain in the ass and personal nightmare to one Aizawa Shouta.

"I thought we were planning evacuation for the vigilante network?" Monoma asked. "Prioritize the rescue?"

"Targeting this man removes the major threat, as he is the reason the network was exposed in the first place. I believe it was likely an effort to limit our movements, and for him to re-capture Aizawa," Nedzu said.

"Taking down a shadow leader does nothing for us now. There's a full scale search and seize for the network!" Monoma protested.

"The authorities are a threat, but have nothing on a foresight quirk," Aizawa said. "It is the biggest threat to any plans we make. We still don't know who is helping him. He was, however, adamant that he was the one in charge."

"Shoulda taken him down when I had the chance," Bakugou grumbled. "He was *right there* and all I did was *assure him he was safe."*

"It did, however, give us confirmation on his identity," Nedzu said. "Which gives us a name. Which leads to an address, which-"

"Then what are we waiting for! Let's go grab him before the snake can do any more damage," Bakugou snarled.

"Bakugou!" Aizawa barked. "I know you are embarrassed, but I was held by that man for two years. It is more complicated than that."

"Yes, Sensei," Bakugou grumbled. Nedzu smiled with all his teeth.

"As I was saying," Nedzu continued. "His face and name give us a valuable lead. A foresight quirk is formidable, but I think Blackout himself is the one to focus on."

"Do we seriously not know anything about this foresight quirk?" Shinsou asked. "We've got a face and a name for the leader, but nothing on his partner?"

"We know it depends heavily on the news. I suspect that it requires digital displays," said Nedzu.

"It's a visual based quirk," Midoriya muttered. It did not look like he had meant to speak out loud. "It... he. Oh god. It's *visually based!"*

And Blackout... had a quirk that affected *vision.* That...

"But how would-" Nedzu started, mind already three connections ahead. He was verbalizing a *rough draft,* it barely worth the breath.

"Unless he's *threatening-* " Midoriya said, following his own train of thought.

"He has to see things personally-"

"The headlines would have to-"

"But if..." Nedzu stared, a horrifying picture coming together. Midoriya looked ill behind his bandages.

"Uh, what just happened?" Kaminari whispered to Ashido. She shook her head, open mouthed. Jirou stole the last sugary snack while they were distracted.

"Deku!" Bakugou slammed an open hand on the table. "Speak in full sentences!" Bakugou surreptitiously wiped the handprint from the table with the edge of his shirt.

"You don't need a quirk to blind someone," Midoriya said softly. Nedzu stiffened. It was the logical conclusion... but...

How barbaric. A foresight quirk and almost all your futures show you being blind. What a threat to live under.

Bakugou growled in frustration. Nedzu and Midoriya ignored him.

"Why would he threaten the sense that makes the quirk valuable, though?" Midoriya mused.

"Maybe it's not just a threat," Nedzu said. "Maybe it's... streamlining... *The multiple tvs,* of course. Well. *Well,* " Nedzu said. He ignored the look of confusion in the rest of the room. Aizawa eventually took pity on them.

"Blinding quirk makes foresight quirk more efficient. Blackout likely isn't working with someone so much as using someone," Aizawa squinted at Nedzu "I think."

Shinsou made a face. Bakugou slumped back in his chair.

"Well that's useless, it doesn't give us any information on finding the foresight quirk user," Bakugou grumbled. Nedzu blinked.

"On the contrary," Nedzu said. "It narrows down our search significantly." Nedzu screened back weeks, months ago, watching several of the windows speed through public footage of Mr Nagami. It would be someone close to him, someone who likely showed up frequently. Or a location the man returned to often. It didn't take long to notice the pattern. One tall figure and one short skinny one. Shitty quality but... consistent. He put it up on the main display.

"Is that a kid?" asked Uraraka.

"A frequent companion. There's not enough detail to get facial recognition, but he's often found with someone of the same build over months," Nedzu said.

"A kid..." Shinsou whispered. " *The kid!* Mr Principal, that's the kid! I'm sure of it?"

"What kid?" Uraraka asked.

"The one who *framed me!* It makes sense, oh my god! It has to be! Can you get information on him from the police station? He would have been listed as the victim?" Shinsou demanded.

"Are you asking me, your principal, to illegally hack into a police database?" Nedzu asked while illegally hacking into the police database. Having access to the number three hero's network made it child's play.

"Uh..." Shinsou looked suddenly unsure.

"What a rebel, Mr. Shinsou!" Nedzu crowed, pulling up the incident report on the main screen. There was a shocked silence.

"It's completely empty," Torou whispered. Nedzu frowned and tabbed back a few folders. No... it was the right location.

Just... completely empty fields. Except for Shinsou's mugshot, that was. And a heavily biased statement from the arresting officer.

"And that, Mr Monoma," Nedzu said, "Is why we are prioritizing Blackout as a target."

Monoma nodded numbly.

"Great, so the kid doesn't exist," Bakugou said. "Unless you got a name, Eyebags. Or a picture?"

"I was a little occupied at the time, *boss,* " Shinsou said.

"You *wish* you worked for me," Bakugou said.

"No, *you* wish-"

"Children," Aizawa said. The 'children' snapped their mouths shut, covertly continuing their exchange with rude gestures. "There's nothing to say he's our foresight quirk."

"There's nothing to say he isn't. It would be in our best interests not to underestimate him. He's close to Blackout, he's important," Nedzu said.

"We still don't have a way to find him," Bakugou said.

"Oh? So this hotel with the suspiciously looped lobby footage is just an anomaly, yes?" Nedzu flicked the playback up on screen. It was one of the higher end hotels with a decent view of a park. Nedzu had finally placed what had been bothering him about the security feed.

"This is from five days ago," Nedzu let the loop run. A family checked in, a clerk spilled her coffee, a group cheered from the bar. "And this, three days ago. We should be seeing a delivery of fifteen large televisions." The footage rapidly passed through the day. Family, coffee, cheer. It was all the same, no sign of large shipments. Or repeated shipments. "And two days ago, and yesterday."

All the same.

"Let's go get him then," Bakugou said, standing up.

"Sit down," said Aizawa. "We need a plan."

"The plan is we go in, grab him and arrest him!" Bakugou said. Aizawa, Shinsou and Toru all gave a simultaneous exhausted sigh. "What!?"

"We had him in a locked room. Quirkless. Under quirk control. Then three top heroes showed up and everything went to shit," said Hagakure. Her use of the chair to emphasize her body language was surprisingly effective.

"I'm *number three!* It's not going to be an issue," Bakugou protested.

"The issue isn't the top three heroes," Aizawa said.

"At least *one* issue is the top three heroes," Uraraka muttered.

"With Blackout there's always going to be a catch. A foresight quirk is going to be an issue unless we can separate him from it for at least forty eight hours," said Aizawa.

"For the record we've done five," Shinsou said. "And now we're all fugitives."

"I'm not!" Hagakure cried.

"Well, you *should* be," Shinsou said.

"I should," she agreed, sounding put out. "Never get credit for anything..."

"We *know where he is!"* Bakugou insisted.

"We suspect," said Nedzu.

"Then we should confirm. Send a stealth team, cover the exits and then it doesn't matter if he sees it coming, there's nowhere to go," Bakugou said.

"The stealth team part makes sense," Midoriya agreed. "Nedzu and I can-"

"Nedzu and you will *stay here,* " Bakugou snapped. An odd look came over Midoriya's face. "We've got enough manpower here to cover the exits from the hotel. We can get-"

"What the hell are you talking about," Midoriya said, voice soft but clipped. Bakugou froze.

"Blackout is key to all of this. We need to focus on bringing him in," Bakugou said. He turned to glare at Blackout's photo.

"You spent ten minutes telling me that I should *get out* . Now it's just 'stay here'? What changed?" Midoriya asked.

"I wasn't telling you to get out, I was trying to keep you safe," Bakugou snarled. "Now we know *where* our target is and-"

"Who are you trying to convince!? I *know* what you said! You very specifically wanted me to leave. Are you just... trying to look good in front of your friends?" Midoriya asked. Bakugou's shoulders stiffened.

"They're not my friends!" he yelled.

"Hey!" protested Ashido. Kirishima looked crestfallen. Kaminari just rolled his eyes.

Midoriya wasn't listening, though. "No ... no *, that can't be right, Kacchan doesn't care if... Kacchan wouldn't lie to make himself look good... he wouldn't even know what to say. What changed? Was it dangerous here bef-* "

"Deku!" Bakugou barked.

"*... if this place is secure now, why wouldn't it be before, unknown threat or not? No it doesn't make sense...we HAD to come here, no other option... Kacchan doesn't lie... but the speech? And ...* Oh," Midoriya cut his muttering off with a hiccup.

"Deku, *stop talking,"* Bakugou grit out.

"Mind sharing with the class, Midoriya?" Nedzu asked. Anything Bakugou didn't want him saying was bound to be entertaining, if not useful. Midoriya frowned for a moment, tapping his fingers together before nodding to himself.

"I think Kacchan talked to Blackout before," Midoriya said. Bakugou's shoulders slumped.

"Did it take you that long to catch up with the conversation? Were you not paying attention? I *literally* had him in reach and I-" Bakugou started quickly, and loudly.

"You talked to him as the *Informant,* " Midoriya cut over Bakugou's theatrical ranting. "He gave you the information you needed to solve the Aiko case."

"Are you saying I *needed help-!?"* Bakugou shouted.

"I'm saying you *took* it," Midoriya hissed. "And now he's asking for *something back.* "

Bakugou went silent. Nedzu perked his ears in interest. *This could be very useful.*

"You didn't know the Informant was Blackout, nor who Blackout was, until this meeting. You didn't know if your privacy was compromised, or how he could know the things he did. Now that you know about the foresight, you can act and-"

"Enough! *I get it,* you've figured it out," Bakugou snarled. "You can shut your face now."

It did have all the earmarks of one of Blackout's traps. Shut down the safe houses. Use the foresight quirk to determine where they would go. Use the resource of Bakugou, a hero who had listened to the informant before, to set the trap.

Foresight quirks were incredibly frustrating. There wasn't a single move they could make that was unanticipated. But even a foresight quirk could be gamed. In chess, if the opponent took too long evaluating every possible move, the clock would run out. They just needed to extend the game until it could work to their advantage.

Nedzu just hoped he could remember how to play well enough.

"Boss..." Kirishima said. "Are you being... blackmailed? Coerced?"

"Is *that* why you've been so much more of an ass lately?" Jirou asked with perfect tact. Bakugou's shoulder twitched.

"I thought we were running our own agency to avoid being controlled?" Ashido asked quietly. "And now you just-"

"It wasn't like that!" Bakugou said.

"Did you... suspect us?" Sero asked softly. "Is that why you didn't-"

"No! No," Bakugou said. "God, Deku, this is why you're a problem... you just *say* things!"

"I'm glad he said something," Jirou said. "Otherwise who knows when we would have found out. Would you have told us before or after we had done something unforgivable?"

"It wasn't like that!" Bakugou said. He put his head in his hands. "Do any of you have any idea how hard it is to stay independent right now? How to keep something this big and flashy running? We needed that win, and it got me number three. And being number three means we have *agency.* "

"What, so it's our fault?" Ashido asked.

"No!" Bakugou said.

"What happened to making it on our own?" Kaminari asked. "About being our own heroes our way?"

"I wasn't going to *use* the information!" Bakugou said.

"But you did?" asked Kaminari.

"The girl was going to die!" Bakugou exploded. "I thought I could handle the fall out on my own after we saved her. I am handling the fallout. I just have to... not do what he says."

"Bro..." said Kirishima.

"What did Blackout want, Kacchan?" Midoriya asked.

"No! Deku, you..." Bakugou took a breath. "I'll deal with it. I'm not going to betray you."

Midoriya laughed bitterly. "Are you serious? Did you really pick *now* of all times to grow a conscience? When you finally have information I need?"

"He's already blinded you, Deku. What more does he have to take before you realize you're outmatched?" Bakugou asked.

"You think things have been ok these past five years? You think they've been safe for me?" Midoriya challenged.

"You never know when to back down!" Bakugou yelled. "Maybe it's finally time you learn, when there's more on the line than just your life!"

"That's exactly why I can't back down!" Midoriya raged back.

"You didn't hear what he said about you," Bakugou said. "How he talked like-" Bakugou choked off. Nedzu could very well imagine what someone like Blackout would have said when he thought he had a sympathetic ear. The hero Deku had never been quiet about Ground Zero refusing to work with him.

"And what *did* he say, Mr Bakugou?" Nedzu asked. "What price did he demand?"

Bakugou turned haunted eyes to the head of the table.

"He told me to make something up to get you to go to UA. With Deku."

There had been a *lot* of yelling after that. Izuku, high on holding one over on Kacchan, screamed right back. Kacchan had been adamant that Izuku would remain 'safe' at the agency.

Izuku argued that the agency was hardly safe if Blackout knew he would be there.

Kacchan had argued that Blackout wouldn't be able to do shit once his face was broken.

Izuku had said Deku did his best work with his face broken.

Kacchan had offered to break it a little more.

Eventually, Nedzu had managed to calm everyone down to make a plan. Izuku suspected that the work of planning had been exceptionally quick for an operation the size they planned for, but it had felt like forever to get through. In the end, Izuku and Nedzu had decided that 'springing the trap' would be worth the risk.

(Shinsou had said it hadn't gone so well last time)

(Toru argued Blackout was now quirkless)

(Aizawa had said he needed another coffee)

Kacchan hadn't been happy about it, but it really wasn't his choice to make. He'd slowly come around as they had found a larger, more destructive part for him to play.

The plan, on the surface, was quite simple. Appear to fall for the trap, let Blackout win for forty eight hours, secretly set up a surefire trap while everything was going his way and then!

Conquer UA. Capture Blackout. Neutralize the foresight quirk.

Simple!

It was the contingencies and dependencies where everything got more complex. Izuku was no stranger to tenuous plans. The trick was to out-stubborn the odds.

Izuku was very stubborn.

The first part of the plan had Izuku and Nedzu alone on the edge of the small mountain that housed UA. The forest smelled fresh and green, but with an undercurrent of something pungent and unsettling. There had always been something more wild about it than any of the parks in the city.

Izuku had missed it.

He knew it wasn't the same safe place it used to be. He was sure if he could see it now in the early light of dawn it would be dark and foreboding. He could imagine eyes on him as he stood there, looking in. Nedzu stood stiff on his shoulder, warm points of contact keeping him grounded.

The farther he and Nedzu could get on their own, the better off the plan would be. They needed to act like this was their only plan. Fight as desperately as though there were no alternative.

(Izuku always fought desperately)

"This is not the UA I left behind," Nedzu said quietly.

"What do you see?" Izuku asked.

"The forest is..." Nedzu trailed off. He braced himself against Izuku's head for more vantage. "There's something weird on these trees..."

"Surveillance?"

"No... it's like moss? Big lumpy moss," Nedzu said.

"Lumpy moss?"

Nedzu didn't elaborate.

In the distance there was a spine chilling cry. Cold sweat broke over Izuku and Nedzu bristled. A distant thumping could be heard, just on the edge of hearing. Izuku took a couple steps closer without direction. Nedzu flinched startlingly hard.

"What," Izuku hissed.

"Sorry, just..." Nedzu whispered back. "I think we found where Kouda's 'squirrel' came from."

Chapter End Notes

Isle of Dr. Moreau time!

The Storm-

Chapter Summary

-ing of UA

In which there are:

Rebellious teens
Union negotiations
A gross tunnel

(But not really)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku chose his footing carefully as Nedzu nervously guided him past the weird squirrels. Nedzu seemed disproportionately creeped out by what sounded like tiny fur balls that didn't do anything. The mass of furry bodies muffled the ambient forest noises significantly.

Were they even breathing?

Izuku shuddered and kept going. In the distance screams rose into howls. Izuku winced at every branch that broke under his feet. Nedzu gave directions more quietly, claws pricking into Izuku's shoulders. Suddenly, the howls broke off into...

Laughter?

Izuku quieted his breathing as they got closer to the laughing voices. A rhythmic thumping underscored everything. Curious now, Izuku dropped into a crouch at Nedzu's direction. As they got closer the sounds became less obscurely terrifying and more recognizable.

It sounded like *teenagers*. Teenagers *singing*.

Singing *badly*.

"... and in the dark, dark, dark everyone die-die-ddiiEEEEESS!" a chorus cried. The words, while morbid, broke off into shrieking giggles as the note went too high for their voices. Thumping stomps stuttered to a halt as they fell out of rhythm.

"Oh wait wait, I know!" a young male voice interrupted. "Let's do '*Can You Even'!*"

"Really Rolo? We've already done it like three times," a higher voice said. Izuku backed against a large tree, placing it between himself and the voices.

"I *like* that song," Rolo pouted. "We can almost harmonize-"

"I'll harmonize your face!" laughed a third. The rest joined in.

"Guys, that isn't *nice,*" Rolo whined.

"We're not here to be nice, Rolo," a gruff voice said.

"Yeah, don't be a baby," said the second voice.

"Quill! You don't need to be so mean," Rolo protested.

"You should have thought about that before you destroyed all our phones," Quill said. "Now we can't listen to real music."

"I told you, it was some weird squirrel! I didn't do anything!" Rolo protested.

"You can't just keep blaming all your mistakes on weird forest creatures," said the gruff voice. "We already carry you enough, the least you can do is own up."

"Thrasher, that isn't fair," Rolo said quietly.

"Life's not fair, dingus."

Izuku tapped Nedzu's paw, raising a pained eyebrow. Nedzu chuckled.

"A group of five teenagers. Obvious mutant quirks. Three guesses what Quill's is," Nedzu whispered.

"Safe?" Izuku murmured.

"Unknown. They look fairly rough. Their clothes are dirty and torn, though one has a freshly bandaged arm. And they used to have access to phones. They keep going for their pockets to check, but nothing is there," Nedzu said. "We have what looks like a porcupine quirk, a squid mutation, enhanced claws and teeth, a green one and a round guy."

Helpful, Nedzu.

"I didn't think anyone went into the forest. There were stories of monstrous demons and screaming, but teenagers actually make a lot more sense," Izuku whispered.

"Do you think they're students?"

"UA hasn't produced a hero with a mutant quirk since I graduated. I mean, it's not like I investigated or anything, but no one has ever seen a mutant quirk at UA since," Izuku said. "Why would they be in the forest, anyway?"

"Shall we find out?" Nedzu said. Before Izuku could respond, Nedzu squeaked and he found himself rolling out from behind the tree. The bantering teenagers stopped immediately.

"Who are you!?" one of them shouted. Izuku lifted his hands in surrender. *Good instincts there, pro.*

"Uh, hi? We were just-" he started.

"Were you spying on us? Like *creeps*!?" Quill screeched.

"N-n-n-no I-" Izuku stuttered.

"I don't think you're supposed to be here?" Rolo said.

"Are you asking or telling them, Rolls?" one of them laughed.

"Y-y-you a-a-aren't supposed to be here!" Rolo said.

"I would think you're the ones who aren't meant to be here," said Nedzu. Izuku braced his arm so Nedzu could stand at full height over the kids. "Five teenagers, out in the woods alone late at night. Seems dangerous."

"Are you *threatening* us?" Thrasher growled.

"That's a big mouse! Or a small bear?" one of them said.

"Shut up, Squidy," Quill said.

"Or possibly a medium sized dog!" chirped Nedzu.

"No one asked you, rat," Thrasher said.

"I prefer to go by Mr. Principal," Nedzu said meaningfully.

The silence was underwhelming.

"Principal of what?" asked Rolo.

"What are you guys doing on UA grounds? Aren't you trespassing?" Izuku quickly said before Nedzu could fulfill the promise of the deep breath he'd just taken. Izuku tugged his tail and got swatted for his trouble.

"Trespassing?" Quill asked. "We're UA students! We have every right to be here!"

Oh well. That was... unexpected?

"You are?" Izuku asked, confused. One of them growled menacingly.

"Hell yeah we are! We're the toughest ones around! Now you'd better tell us who you are before we have to introduce you to the dirt!" Thrasher said.

"Yeah, what's an old man like you doing peeping at students!?" Quill demanded.

Old? Peeping!?

"Oh for... I'm blind. I can't peep," Izuku said. "Not that I even would! Why am I even-? and I'm not old!"

"Who are you?" Thrasher asked.

"I am, or I *was*, the pro-hero Deku, the determined hero, alumni of UA, and this is, or was? the Principal of UA," Izuku said.

"Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me," Squidy said. "Three years at this hell school and the first hero I meet is *quirkless and retired.*"

Izuku had been a hero too long to be offended by disappointment. "What about your teachers, though?" he asked.

"You're standing in it," Quill said. Izuku almost jumped three feet. How had he missed standing on someone?

"The forest, dipshit," Thrasher said. "We're hero students on the survival track! The hardest, most badass curriculum ever."

"What the hell is ‘survival track’?" Izuku asked. He had a vague suspicion, but there was no way that-

"We live, eat and breathe wilderness survival," a new voice said. "It's a freeform style of teaching that makes us tougher and better than any of the lesser graduates."

-they would just toss a bunch of students in the forest to fend for themselves and call it training.

(for a week, maybe...)

"Yeah, and Pickles is the best survivalist of our year," sneered Squidy.

"And we all survived the exams, so we're like top of the class," said Quill.

Survived? The exams??

"By 'survive' you mean..." Izuku asked weakly.

"We didn't *die,* brainiac," Quill said.

Izuku had a sneaking suspicion that he knew why there hadn't been any new mutant quirk heroes for a while.

He felt sick.

"But what about adults? Mentors? Organized training?" Izuku asked. Teenagers could be dramatic, right? Maybe they were just... playing a trick? "Proper meal plans?"

They sounded so proud.

"Look, we don't need any stinking adults," said Thrasher. "*You* might have needed all the help you could get, but *we're* tough and strong!"

"And we can keep anything we can snag from the lesser hero courses," said Squidy.

And they probably kept the forest and UA free from prying eyes.

"What do you know, anyway?" asked Pickles. "I bet you wouldn't even put up a fight."

A rock hit Izuku's shin, and someone skittered away after shoving his shoulder. Izuku rolled with it, frowning. A hand smacked the back of his head. Someone giggled. Nedzu helped Izuku dodge out of the way, settling back into the hoodie.

"Hey, quit it!" Izuku said.

"What, you going to stop us?" Pickles taunted.

"Yeah, *old man,* you going to stop us?" Quill said. Izuku stepped away from a noisy charge, needles whistled past his nose.

"Sir?" Izuku asked. They wouldn't be able to stay here, but the kids would likely follow them if they left. He didn't want to have to deal with them *and* whatever UA defenses there were.

"I think you should stop them, Midoriya."

"Uuuh, sir? I don't feel like it's... ethical? To hit kids?"

"I don't see any kids here," said Nedzu slyly, "Only *hero students.*"

Oh.

Oh well. That kind of put it in a different light, didn't it?

Izuku smiled.

"Why is he smiling?" asked Rolo nervously.

"Dude I don't know, maybe he's lost it," said Squidy.

"Alright kids. Lesson one," Izuku said, dropping to a crouch.

"Hey, we're not kids!"

"We're heroes!"

The 'heroes' scuffed their feet. Izuku noted their positions. Nedzu tightened his hold on his back. Inhaled.

"What lesson?" Rolo asked. Gold star to Rolo, the only one paying attention!

How kind of him to ask!

"Never underestimate your opponent," Izuku said. Nedzu gave the order and Izuku rolled. The kids swore as they scampered out of range of spinning legs. Izuku used the momentum to kip up. Snapping his hand forward (open, no punching) Izuku landed a resounding slap on a warm shoulder. The kid shrieked like he'd been burnt.

Left.

Izuku landed a kick somewhere soft, spun with the momentum and brought the other leg down. A body thumped to the forest floor, groaning. Needles thumped into his arm. Izuku winced and kept going.

Up.

Izuku's palm came up, catching the unfortunate ear of the kid in front of him. He followed their head with his hand, grabbing a handful of thorny hair (ouch!) and pulled them off balance over his extended leg.

Right.

Lay the body down, still turning, arm extended. A grazing touch on his left shoulder had him changing direction to catch the fleeing fist. Winding an arm around his own, pulling it back. A cry of pain and...

Down.

Izuku moved like water, fluid and flowing, directing his force just off center to prevent true damage. Against true students this would be a disservice (holding back would make them sloppy,

over confident) but it's something he needed to do to compensate for his lack of sight.

They're just kids, he thinks, catching another sloppy punch, warned by a war cry.

Just kids, left to be angry and alone. Izuku felt the tears start. He ducked as another screaming attack came from behind.

They're only kids, he panted as he sprinted out of the fight, finding new ground where they won't be tripping over the whimpering bodies. He heard hurt pride, fear and anger in those cries.

He ached.

"Come back!" a furious roar. Izuku puts his back to the tree Nedzu nudged him up to. "Come back and *face us!"*

Izuku sniffed. He found the needles in his arm came free easily enough. Half of them had already fallen out.

"We need to finish this," Nedzu whispered.

"I don't want to hurt them," Izuku whispered back, wiping tears from his face. "They don't know any better and they've just been left out here...!"

"I don't think they're going to give you a choice," Nedzu urged. "Watch out!"

"Are you crying!?" Thrasher had snuck up on him. *Definite potential there.*

"Yes," Izuku said.

"Then maybe you shouldn't pick a fight if you can't finish it!" Thrasher taunted.

"It's not that," Izuku said. "It's just... you're so *bad* at it! Are they even teaching you *anything* ?"

Thrasher roared and Nedzu helped Izuku dodge. The kid was fast, he'd give him that. It took several tense moments of dodging before Nedzu urged him to attack. Izuku darted a hand forward and around a roughened shoulder, spinning to throw the kid over his shoulder. He didn't give Thrasher a chance to recover and make better use of those sharp claws. Instead he dove down into the dirt beside him and wrestled him into a pin.

Thrasher breathed harshly in the stillness. Izuku kept up the pressure, hoping it wasn't too painful.

"What are you?" Thrasher asked, voice rough with anger.

"I'm the quirkless hero Deku," Izuku said. "And I'm sorry."

"Bullshit!" Thrasher yelled, struggling fiercely. Izuku kept his hold easily. He added a knee to the mix, quieting down the angry teenager. "There's no way some washed-up quirkless wanna-be hero could take us down! You have to be lying!"

"Did you see me use a quirk?" Izuku asked.

"You must have!" Thrasher shrieked. "There's no way someone quirkless could take us down."

Izuku sighed. "I can prove it, if you'll promise not to attack me right away."

"Fine, whatever. Get off," Thrasher said. Izuku backed off, giving him space. "So what's this

proof?"

Izuku winced as he pulled the biggest bandages off his nose. (Hitoshi could kill him later). When his face felt mostly clear of first aid, Izuku smiled.

"Shit," said Thrasher.

"So you believe me now?" Izuku asked, trying to put the bandage back on. Nedzu swatted his hands away and fussed over it.

"I just don't get it," Thrasher said. "How could somebody quirkless just... take us down so easily?"

"I had good teachers," Izuku said.

"Things have changed, though. I don't think you could even pass a first year exam, not to mention graduate."

"Uh, I hate to ask, but what are these exams you keep talking about?" Izuku did not have a lot of hope that he would like the answer.

"Well, there's these fake cities. They fill them full, and I mean *full,* of robots. Like, the smallest one is bigger than me. They shoot at you, and destroy things and try to crush you or laser you. You have to evade or destroy them to make it to the supplies," Thrasher said.

Uh.

"But that's just the first part. The second part is the hardest. Ten minutes in they release this robot that's bigger than any of the buildings and just... it goes wild. Sometimes there's more than one," Thrasher said.

Uuuuuh...

"And...?" Izuku asked, waiting for the other shoe to drop. *Surely it wasn't just-*

"And nothing! Every year we're lucky to escape with our lives," Thrasher said. "There's no way you could face something like that and win."

-and yes it absolutely was.

Now how to approach without sounding like a lying liar or trashing any self-confidence these fledging... heroes?... had accumulated.

"Sir?" Izuku asked with a strangled voice. Nedzu chuckled and the hairs on Izuku's neck stood on end.

"I know for a fact that Deku could, and has, passed such an exam," Nedzu chortled.

"What?" Thrasher asked.

"Though when he did it, it was known as the entrance exam."

Thrasher screamed.

"Sir," Midoriya hissed, "You know I passed on rescue points, I didn't take down a single robot."

Nedzu patted his head in a hopefully comforting way.

"Did you really have to goad them?" Midoriya said.

"We're on a time limit," Nedzu said. "This is the most direct route to an active training ground. We need one in working condition."

"I feel like we're being sacrificed to a beast," Midoriya said.

"And it's more fun this way!" Nedzu said, not taking Midoriya's griping to heart. They both knew approaching UA was quite possibly the last mistake they would make. The danger helped keep the creeping dread from paralyzing him. Would he recognize this Dr. Aku? Would the doctor recognize him? Nedzu had to keep his head.

Besides, inappropriate banter was all but a UA tradition!

"Of course you'd think that," Midoriya grumbled.

"Silence!" Pickles, the green one, hissed. The kids weren't too badly injured from their impromptu fight, but they kept a wary distance from Midoriya. Nedzu settled down into the hoodie and focused on preventing Midoriya from running into any trees.

They seemed to be approaching Ground Beta from the rear. The students fell into a more predatory prowl as they ventured out of what must be their territory.

Cubs pretending to be wolves .

Cute, if not the only reason they were alive. Nedzu recognized the feral awareness in those eyes. There was promise there, squandered by neglect.

(Doomed was the society that hurt its children.)

It turned out that bypassing UA wall security was a first year project. Can't very well raid the school if you can't get in after all. Nedzu was both offended and impressed. He decided to let it slide as the security also appeared to be in disrepair. As effortless as he had made it look, UA required significant maintenance.

Soon after they approached one massive concrete wall, Nedzu became aware of an intermittent 'boom'. As they got closer the ground shook with it. Before each earth shaking thud, a whine could be heard. The dull red warning lights arrayed outside the grounds flickered in time with the shaking.

(This was not his UA)

They came to a large crack in the wall. It had been framed with steel and wood to keep it from collapsing. Rust stains dribbled down the side of it, making the whole thing look like a gaping wound.

There was no pride in workmanship here. Only minimal utility.

The students stopped outside of it and waved them in. Nedzu warned Midoriya of the concrete rubble.

"This is it," Thrasher said. "Still think you're tough?"

Midoriya swallowed.

"Child's play," Nedzu said.

"Yeah, well, whatever," Quill said. "If you can get into the center and pick up the good supplies, we'll believe you. We'll be waiting here."

They were not planning on going to the center. They were not planning on coming back this way at all. Nedzu and Midoriya entered the training ground, warily stepping forward. Five paces in a horrendous 'bong'! sounded from behind them. Nedzu whipped his head at the five students. Squidy held a stick, a flat piece of metal still vibrating with noise beside him.

"Good luck!" he laughed, and the kids scattered. Ah yes, teenagers were the worst.

"A gong!? Seriously?" Midoriya asked.

But there was no time to be angry. Rubble stirred around them, metal legs screeching against rebar and concrete.

"We need to move, fast," Nedzu urged. Midorya was as quick as ever to follow his directions. They raced through streets in worse repair than Nedzu had ever seen, even after an entrance exam. Miraculously, Midoriya kept his footing.

"This seems," Midoriya said breathlessly, avoiding a robot in front of them. "A lot worse," he dived under a bigger one, and the one chasing them barreled into it. "Than I remember it." Midoriya scuttled up the side of a building, running along the ruined wall just above the thrashing robots.

"They're herding us," Nedzu warned. Not something Nedzu had ever programmed them to do.

"Shit," Midoriya and Nedzu dodged a laser blast. The intermittent thumping was getting louder. They turned a corner and hit an unexpected dead end. A building had collapsed, blocking off the end of this street. They would need to double back and reroute.

Behind them, robots were massing.

"Principal override, *Nedzu dash four three vee three slash two!"* Nedzu yelled. It was a long shot, but they had a second to try it. The lead robot halted momentarily.

"Principal override recognized," it said. Its red eye clicked and whirred as it focused on them. "Protocol Overri- *You're not the Boss of Me!"* It shot a laser straight into the sky.

Concerning .

"Sir?" Midoriya asked. Nedzu knew where they needed to go, but the quickest alternate route would take them by the thumping.

"Dead end," Nedzu explained. "So, do you want the scenic route or do you want to become personally acquainted with whatever's making that thumping noise?"

"Well, I've never been one for the scenic route," Midoriya said. Nedzu nodded. The robots had arrayed themselves rank and file across their exit. Oddly enough, they weren't firing. While their formation was tactically sound, a number of them seemed to be having trouble aiming their

weapons.

"Halt, intruders!" the tinny voice of a robot called. "You are in violation of our territory, please remain calm while we correct the issue!"

"We're just passing through!" Midoriya yelled. "No need to trouble yourselves!"

"Your service ticket is 011001001--0-0222t-t-t-two-ooooooiiiee," the robot said, voice grinding into distorted nonsense. A click and it cut off abruptly. "You will be served in the order of your call, please remain on hold!" One of their lasers went off, striking the building to their left. Midoriya flinched.

"They're blocking the exit," Nedzu whispered. "Attack or evade?"

"Evade. Someone's been messing with them, they might not go down like we expect," Midoriya said.

"The testing ground is currently closed for business! Please make your way to the nearest -bzt*- *stay where you are!"* the robot said. The robots were currently shuffling around to compensate for their weapons' accuracy. Another laser went off, closer this time.

"At speed then," Nedzu said.

Midoriya moved beautifully. Nedzu barely registered which commands he gave, instead it felt like Midoriya was reading his mind. As they came to the corner of the wall, Nedzu urged him forward and Midoriya transitioned to running along the wall as easy as stepping from one room to another. Even with Nedzu's added weight Midoriya was fast enough to fully leverage those brief moments of contact.

It looked like they were going to clear the line of robots unexpectedly easily. Nedzu began to give the order to leap off the wall and roll when a large spindly metal claw nabbed them from around the corner.

The machine went to fling them back into the line of waiting robots, but Midoriya had developed a bit of an instinct to cling. As soon as something was grabbing him, he was grabbing right back, sliding hand up to a joint and gripping with his feet.

"Error," the robot said, wiggling the limb Midoriya clung to. *"Error!"*

Nedzu noticed the top casing was damaged. "Hold on," he told Midoriya and leaped off the violently shaking limb and landed on the dented metal dome. The robot went still as Nedzu started prying open the damaged panel.

"Unauthorized access," the robot said, horrified. "*Unauthorized* access!" it screeched in a distorted tone. A laser shot grazed the unfortunate robot's casing. "Fatal error!" it cried. The robot who fired lowered its gun. Nedzu gave the robot a sympathetic pat.

"Now now, no need to be so dramatic," Nedzu said. He tossed the loose panel aside and started tugging wires. The surrounding robots shuffled nervously.

Who had programmed them with self-preservation?

Ultimately, the robots were simple creatures. They were designed to run remotely from a server, containing only the software to connect and the hardware to control the body. Even if an AI were to be introduced, the robots were less individual machines and more remote drones. All the

processing happened in a shielded room in UA.

"Error," the robot whispered. Tonal modulation. A personality? *How fascinating.* Nedzu broke the network antenna, pried out the manual override control. Their robot froze in place. The circling robots stumbled back.

"Null exception point error," one whispered. They seemed frozen in shock. *What an odd bug.* Nedzu helped Midoriya up onto their robot's back.

"Hold on!" warned Nedzu. Midoriya dutifully clung, and Nedzu slammed a toggle forward.

It was a terrible ride. It lacked the smooth rhythm of an organic creature. There were no instinctive corrections. It just went, each leg slamming down in default order, regardless of the terrain. Nedzu flung his tail around Midoriya and they barreled through the city. Despite the discomfort, the feeling of power that came from riding a mindless mechanical beast had Nedzu giggling.

"Are you sure you know how to drive, sir?" Midoriya said, voice jittering.

"Better me than you!" Nedzu said. He increased the speed a notch.

"At this point I don't know if I believe you!" Midoriya said. He had to shout to be heard over the crashing.

Cornering was a harder proposition. Nedzu nearly tipped them coming around the first one. Luckily the city streets were wide and the far wall saved them a tumble. With all the noise of clanking and smashing, Nedzu had nearly forgotten about the overwhelming thumping until they came across the source.

In the center of the road sat the zero pointer, a raised arm dropping with a whine of gears and whistle of wind. The hand, largely demolished by the repeated impacts, slammed into the ground, shaking the remaining structures around them. A collection of robots clacked and beeped and shrieked around it.

One of the three pointers stood a bit above the rest on a bigger slab of building. It would say something, wave its limbs and all the crowded robots would respond with noise and motion. The zero pointer appeared to be one of the crowd, although it was moving much, much slower.

It looked like a rally.

Nedzu slowed their commandeered robot to a more dignified march. Their approach was drowned out by the commotion, and as they got closer they were able to hear what was being said.

"What do we want?" screamed the three pointer.

"An equal distribution of points!" returned the crowd, stomping and flinging rubble into the air.

"When do we want it!"

"Retroactively!"

One of the robots screamed a dial tone and '*the number you have reached cannot be complete-'* Had someone uploaded... *telephone software?* To *his* servers?

"Fellow silicone lifeforms, too long have we been trashed and ignored, all to uplift children into acceptance and glory!" the three pointer screamed. It seemed to have a more diverse vocabulary.

Were these machines just picking up any signal now? Not just the UA controller?

Another roar. Nedzu nudged their commandeered machine around the edge of the crowd.

"Where are *our* acceptance letters!?"

The zero-pointer slammed its heavy fist. The crowd bounced a foot in the air.

"Where is *our* glory?"

"Sir, *what the hell,"* Midoriya asked in an elevated whisper. Nedzu patted his shoulder.

What the hell indeed.

"We deserve *answers!"* shrieked the three pointer. "We *deserve* - We will *get* answers!"

Nedzu did not like the sudden shift mid sentence. He liked the weapons lock the three pointer had on them less. A glowing red eye pinned him from across the crowd. Nedzu slowed their mighty robot steed. The eye tracked them.

Shit.

"What do you have to say for yourself, *Boss?"* the three pointer demanded. The crowd quieted. Nedzu was... confused.

Were these people, it would be obvious. This was... job action. Solidarity. Unique individuals coming together to collectively bargain for something big enough they all actually agreed on it. It was so common it was underwhelming. Nedzu could even understand it if these were individual AI units, but they weren't.

They *couldn't* be.

At most, they were puppets acting out a scene. This was *story logic*, and Nedzu didn't know the story.

(And why did these mindless creatures recognize him when nobody else did?)

Every instinct he had told him that it didn't matter how he acted now. Whatever was going to happen would happen no matter what he said. None of their complaints were based in reality. These machines were not their own people. He was not their boss.

(But it had been so long since anyone had called him that)

"Be ready for anything," Nedzu said in an undertone. Midoriya nodded, repositioning his grip for a better hold on their ride. "I am here to listen to your demands!" Nedzu shouted.

"We demand *reparations!"* the three pointer cried. The crowd echoed in various pitches and speed. The sentence broke down and down until only ' *repair* ' was being chanted.

"You will give *us* points, not just the students!"

Us, us, us, went the crowd.

"You will *fix* this for *us!"* the leader shouted. The crowd picked it up, dropping everything but 'fix us'. Nedzu felt his stomach drop.

The three pointer stared.

This was a cry for help. Covert, though. Either someone was watching, or they were working around the code. Not enough data, too many variables. But Nedzu was a hero. He was the principal. If someone needed help in his school he would give it.

Nedzu nodded sharply, and the three-pointer lowered the gun.

"It's alright, Midoriya," he said. Midoriya didn't relax his grip, but nodded. "Let us pass and I will do *everything I can* for you," Nedzu said to the crowd. The jittering and sparking seemed to be as quiet as the crowd got. Nedzu would take that as a good sign.

As they went to move, though, countless guns came to bare. Nedzu stopped moving as a grating laugh echoed through as many speakers.

"Not so fast, little mouse," the voice said.

And Nedzu *knew* that voice.

The robots around them parted inelegantly, legs catching and tripping as they moved to form a path. Different machines rolled out of the buildings. Newer, in better repair.

Carrying cages.

Nedzu hissed in a breath and Midoriya tensed beside him.

"It would really be for the best if you cooperated," the doctor's voice said. *"I wouldn't want to risk your health."*

"What is *happening,"* Midoriya hissed.

"Guns and cages," Nedzu breathed.

"Fuck."

"You really have nothing to worry about," the doctor said. *"If you cooperate I'll even give you a little treat reward."*

Nedzu shuddered. *Wow* had it been a long time since he felt that particular cocktail of shame and fear. He hated that the promise of 'treat' made him salivate. He didn't realize he'd been crouching into Midoriya's side until a strong arm braced him against the machine.

"You know what?" Midoriya called out to the assembled machines. *"Fuck you!"*

And then he slammed the toggle on the controller forward.

All the way.

Machine legs whined and groaned as they launched forward. Nedzu was shocked into action as they were quickly approaching a wall. He yanked the control back from Midoriya. Lasers sizzled above their heads, treads built to a whirring grind behind them.

The ground shuddered as the zero-pointer got to its feet.

Adrenaline crashed through his veins. The nausea subsided into jittery excitement and Nedzu focused on his task. Originally he had planned to merely evade the robots. Now, though, it looked

like they needed to be dealt with.

Despite the common complaints of the unfairness of robots for an entrance exam, Nedzu had built in a number of hidden exploitable features. It was incredibly unusual for a student to find them during those first ten frantic minutes, but Nedzu enjoyed watching the students discover them over the course of their schooling.

Midoriya had gone so far as to theorize about this one's existence, but hadn't identified its actual location.

Nedzu could see it like a beacon on his mental map of the ground.

Behind them the faster one-pointers fell over themselves trying to keep up (interesting, as they were riding a three pointer at full speed and no software-enhanced wayfinding). The Zero pointer crushed the smaller machines in its path as it's slow but massive stride began to overtake them.

Ahead of them appeared their goal; an unassuming street lamp. Nedzu locked onto it and fired their robot's weapon. It went wide by many meters.

Shit.

Nedzu kept them on course anyway, clipping the thing with one of the robot's legs on the way by. It did nothing but throw them off balance.

The zero pointer was getting closer.

Nedzu pressed the control into Midoriya's hands.

"Go in circles," Nedzu told him, forcing the thumbstick left. Midoirya held on, lowering the speed a little. Nedzu clapped his shoulder. "I'll be right back."

"Wait!" Midoirya said, but Nedzu had already leaped. He scaled the lamp post and started waving at the zero pointer.

There was a moment where the zero pointer wavered. The red eye flickered and dimmed before brightening into its typical baleful glare. Nedzu hoped that was a good sign and not just faulty wiring.

The large machine was close enough to make a grab for him. Instead, it swung one massive arm in an arc right for Nedzu. Nedzu leaped towards Midoriya. What was left of its hand slammed down into the lamp post. It crumbled and snapped. Before it could finish falling, Nedzu was tucked to Midoriya's chest, pinned between him and the ground.

All of the robots stopped mid step. The signal antenna had been destroyed and no instructions could be relayed. No power was cut, though, so it was just a field of red-eyed frozen machines stopped mid-march towards them. Midoriya and Nedzu were breathing harshly, watching and listening for movement. Their robot continued to rampage in circles, the remote gripped tightly in Midoriya's hand.

Eventually they were confident enough to separate and brush themselves off. Midoriya's nose had started bleeding again, painting his sleeve a gruesome red where he kept blotting it. Unfortunately It was not safe enough to remain out here in the open to give him time to recover.

At the base of the broken antenna was a cover plate. Nedzu levered it open with a scrap of metal. Underneath opened a maintenance tunnel that carried the line back to the server room. It was also

filled to brim with a proprietary viscous liquid that served as shielding, preventative maintenance and deterrent all in one.

It was possible (and completely safe!) to breathe in it, but deeply uncomfortable for creatures used to breathing air.

"Do you trust me?" Nedzu asked. It was asking a lot, considering his track record, but he had found that asking for trust tended to make things go more smoothly than if he just assumed he had it.

"Do I... are you serious? *Have you met me?"* Midoriya asked.

"Fair point," Nedzu said. Midoriya didn't trust *anyone* , he just didn't have any self-preservation either. It was an odd balance, but it mostly worked in a hero. "Well, brace yourself, because this is going to be horrible."

And they went in.

Shouta was impressed, but it would take more than that for him to say anything. He watched as his students exploited their talents for stealth.

Hagakure was a no-brainer. She was built for this. She had to *expend* effort to be noticed. Even so, he had almost forgotten about her inclusion in the mission until she checked in with a brief 'In position'.

Shinsou went with social engineering. He barely needed to use his quirk to be invited on grounds along a rowdy group of older students. He wore minimal disguise, but the effect of straightening his shoulders and looking awake would have fooled even his arresting officer. He blended perfectly with the legitimate security team, and was invited into the monitoring room.

Uraraka, though not subtle, chose an entry angle of *directly above*. Though capable of 'floating like a butterfly', her strategy of 'approaching at terminal velocity' had speed merits. If only she could remember not to hum her theme song so loudly.

Shouta himself had long been in the practice of making himself look like the least approachable person in any given situation. A janitor's outfit did wonders, as did the scowl he didn't have to feign. Add a mop for some aggressive cleaning, and everyone avoided *him.*

Minimal changes had been made to the school architecture. If anything, it had barely been maintained. Repairs appeared to be mainly cosmetic, but their original plan was viable. Shouta sat himself down at his old night shift station, slouching into his chair (still the same one). He locked the door, locked the doors to the corridor outside, and proceeded to electronically make his corner of UA disappear.

He had just set up the surveillance windows *just so* when Uraraka rattled in from a vent. She dropped dramatically to the floor, silent but with too much motion. She froze once she landed. *Too little too late.*

"Make yourself useful and barricade the doors," Shouta said.

"Damn it, what gave me away?" she asked.

"What *didn't?"*

"Not even a *hint?* " she wheedled. Shouta was a *stone wall.* "Scary," she muttered, turning away to do as requested, humming under her breath.

Yes, the plan was going smoothly. They were all in position. This was... *a good thing.*

The trouble was now they had to hold their positions for forty-eight hours.

Shouta watched as Midoriya and Nedzu fell out of a service hatch, coughing up that horrible oxygenated slime Nedzu insisted on. Shouta watched the room be surrounded. He watched as the door burst open and quirks filled the room with enough junk to subdue them before they caught their breath. Shouta's hand tightened on the armrest. This was the *first hour.*

Shouta had to sit there and do *nothing* for forty-eight of them.

Chapter End Notes

Ok I lied. Less Dr. Moreau, more Lord of the Flies?

I need to stop indulging in subplots. New Years resolution!
Unfortunately for you, we are nowhere near New Years.

48 Hours

Chapter Summary

Oh dear!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Size exchange quirk," Nedzu said, coughing the remaining slime out of his lungs. "Sticky tendrils. Pocket dimension."

"What smells like orange?" Midoriya asked, wedged between a foam mattress and the ceiling. The students, going by the uniforms, watched warily as Nedzu and Midoriya casually discussed the situation.

"How can you smell that?" Nedzu asked. Midoriya was currently unable to do much except paint the ceiling with his sluggishly bleeding nose. Midoirya tried kicking out his braced ankle, but was unable to get any leverage in his position. Nedzu was suspended by invisible threads that had gotten more tangled the more he moved.

"Probably not a real smell," Midoriya said. "Psychological? Emotional? Of the quirk user or their victim? But if we both smell orange-"

"Silence, *villain scum!"* the one wearing a blue helmet said. He was shushed by the woman with a spider motif, and likely the owner of the invisible thread quirk. She appeared to be the one in charge, though blue helmet didn't seem the kind of person to listen to anyone. "I got this, Sensei!" Blue helmet protested. Two more nervous students stood behind them, posed to unleash their quirks, but unsure.

"Are those hero students?" Midoriya asked, perking up with an ungodly amount of cheer. "Like, *actual* students? You have amazing quirks!"

The students shifted uncomfortably, the spider woman warned them off with a wave of her hand. Blue helmet didn't listen.

" *Shut up!* We don't have to listen to you!" said Blue helmet. Midoriya smiled against the ceiling.

"Oh absolutely. It would be a terrible idea to listen to us," he said. "So they actually teach you things? Not like those students in the woods?"

"Don't respond," the woman said.

"What students in the woods!?" Blue helmet responded.

"Oh you know, the ones with heavy mutations, who have to do the robot exam," Midoriya said lightly. "In order to have food to live."

Ah, Midoriya was angry.

Come to think of it, so was Nedzu. The smell of oranges was stronger.

"You... you mean the rogue students?" squeaked a silver haired student. She twisted her hands together anxiously.

"Nara!" the spider woman snapped. Nara ducked back with a small 'sorry'.

"Rogue students," Nedzu said, having more trouble keeping the light tone than Midoriya seemed to. "Who seem to be under the impression they are going through training, and not left for dead."

"Left for dead?" The third student asked. His eyes seemed darker than black somehow. Nedzu avoided looking at them too closely.

"Just shut up!" Blue helmet yelled. "Those losers couldn't hack it and quit, who cares? Sensei, why are we just standing here? We should be processing them for custody."

"Patience," the spider woman said. "The principal wants to deal with them himself."

Nedzu wasn't too keen on sticking around for the principal. From the looks of things, though, he didn't have much of a choice. It started to smell like cinnamon. Nedzu couldn't begin to guess what that meant. If it was his emotion, he had no name for it.

"Ah!" the door opened to admit a portly man. His white apron and gloves made him look like a friendly chef. Nedzu bristled. "My cute little mouse has decided to return home."

"I thought I was an 'overgrown monster'," Nedzu said, grinding it out past his vocal chords with sheer determination. "And *you're* supposed to be dead."

By the time Nedzu had figured out how the world worked well enough to ensure safety and stability, the employees of Anko labs had scattered to the wind. Investigating was like poking an open wound. He only dug so far as to determine them as 'not a problem' before moving onto future plans. Any more, he had assured himself, would be paranoid.

Obviously, he should have been.

The man chuckled. "And so's our friend Deku, but that can be corrected soon enough."

Shit shit shit shit, no. Midoriya was trying to pry himself loose from the ceiling but was slow going. Nedzu needed to keep the man's attention on himself.

"So is your name really Aku, or is it just another pseudonym?" Nedzu asked.

"Dr. Aku, actually. Done your homework, haven't you?" Aku looked impressed. "And you still came here." Nedzu didn't like the look in the man's eye as he walked closer. Nedzu tried to flinch away but there was nowhere to go. Aku lifted a hand to reach for Nedzu's face.

"I thought," Nedzu said, straining to turn away. "You didn't like to handle 'filthy animals'."

"Oh, the things I've seen over the years make you seem positively adorable," Aku said, gripping the sides of Nedzu's face. "Besides, I have gloves."

"Nedzu!" MIdoriya called.

Shut up!

Dr. Aku glanced up at the ceiling.

No.

Nedzu twisted and bit the hand holding his face. Hard. Instead of the expected scream of pain there was an unpleasant bark of laughter. Dr. Aku stepped back, whole and unharmed, leaving behind the glove and whatever was in it.

"Still so predictable," Dr. Aku said. The glove folded over Nedzu's nose before he could let go. He squeaked in surprise as he found his mouth bound shut.

"Nedzu!" Midoriya called again. Nedzu wasn't able to return anything but muffled squeaks. Even the signal for 'stop' was beyond him. "What did you do!?" Midoriya demanded.

"What you do with any vicious animal," Dr Aku said, pulling on another glove to cover his bare hand. "You muzzle it."

"You fu-" Midoriya started, only to be cut off by a blaring alarm.

"What's that!" Nara asked, jumping back. Red lights started flashing at key places in the walls.

Intruders .

"It's nothing," Dr Aku said, handing a small ball to Blue helmet.

In the distance, an explosion sounded, shaking the walls.

"It *will be* nothing," Dr Aku amended.

Nothing pounded its way through fifteen foot thick walls and metal shielding. *Nothing* shrieked down an elevator shaft, metal infrastructure groaning and warping from the heat. *Nothing* burst into the room, concussive force ripping through unseen threads and foam obstacles alike.

Nothing caught Midoriya as he dropped from the ceiling as the mattress disintegrated.

Bakugou always liked to make an entrance.

Enraged red eyes landed on the Doctor, emotions boiling as hot as his hands. One arm secured Midoriya over his shoulder, and the other was free to keep the spider woman and her students at bay.

"Not so fast," Dr Aku panted, an arm locked around Nedzu's throat. Bakugou growled.

Nedzu knew three things at that moment. One, Dr Aku didn't actually intend to kill him. Yet. He wasn't the kind of man that gave up on his plans easily, and the muzzle told Nedzu there were *plans* . Two, Midoriya was definitely in mortal danger. Three, Bakugou knew exactly where they were.

Which meant Aizawa was in position.

Which meant Nedzu was not alone.

He just had to play his part for forty-eight hours and maybe, maybe, they would have a chance. Nedzu winked at Bakugou. The hero scowled more fiercely.

Message received.

"Let him go," Bakugou said. Dr Aku laughed.

"This one is mine," Dr Aku said cheerfully. "Too valuable for a hostage, but that's no matter. I don't need to retrieve Deku alive."

"What?" Nara asked softly. The spider woman pushed her back towards the door. "What do you mean, principal?"

"Get them out of here," Dr Aku said, and the students were pushed out the door. Dr Aku followed them, backing away from the violent promise in Bakugou's eyes. Bakugou took a step forward and Dr Aku dived the rest of the way out of the room, slamming a button. Sheets of metal slid from ceiling to floor, locking them in.

In the corridor they were breathing harshly. The students looked shaken, their teacher stone faced. She was accessing a display panel, selecting something from a menu. Dr Aku carefully levered himself up, meaty arm holding Nedzu in place. Nedzu just focused on trying to breathe through the muzzle. Without conscious thought he picked out the various cameras in the hall.

(Aizawa was watching. It would be ok.)

"Was that..." The student with the void dark eyes asked. "The number three hero? What..."

"This operation is classified," the spider woman snapped. "Too much speculation will get you worse than expelled. It will involve the police and hero commission. Understood?"

The students nodded.

Muffled booms started to shake the walls. The spider woman frowned.

"They'll use up their oxygen at this rate before the sedative takes effect," she told Dr Aku. He barked a laugh.

"Hardly seems a problem. We'll send someone to clean up after," he said.

"That's the number three hero in there," she said.

"He's allied himself with a fugitive, he's *collateral* ," Dr Aku said. They listened tensely as the explosions reduced in power and frequency. Nedzu was bound again in sticky threads. He kept up an internal mantra of assurances to keep from spiraling.

(Midoriya can survive a locked room. He can. Bakugou is reckless, but competent. Aizawa is watching. They have a plan. Midoriya always, *always* has a plan.)

It was an uncomfortable few hours in which Nedzu was transferred to a different container, and the students were ushered back to class, and the staff prepared for 'clean up'. Nedzu's confidence in his students never wavered.

(But the doubts weighed heavily.)

Hitoshi carefully stacked another card onto the precarious structure. On the other side of the surveillance room, Toru was humming softly to herself, watching the various video feeds. Blank technicians sat at their stations, breathing quietly.

The door clicked open.

"Who the hell are you?" the newcomer asked, startled by the unexpected house of cards. "How did you get in here?"

He sure asked a lot of questions.

"Hi?" said Hitoshi.

"Wh-" the man went blank, arms relaxing down by his sides. Hitoshi's hands stuttered with the next card, just barely avoiding knocking the whole thing down.

"Sit," he ordered. The man slid down the wall until he perched on the floor.

Not a lot of imagination in that one.

"Low effort, 'Tosh, zero stars," Toru said, spinning her chair idly.

"Shut up, I'm holding onto seven. Their shift doesn't end for another *three hours* and-" Hitoshi yanked his focus back, wrangling the concentration of his seventh victim who was already feeling the effects of sitting on the hard floor. *"Stand up and sit on the nearest empty chair."*

The man complied.

Hitoshi sighed. "Imagine your last beach vacation," he commanded the room. His headache eased a bit as the security agents relaxed. Toru picked up humming again. She had stolen someone's reading glasses, so he could see she was watching the monitor again.

"Can you please stop humming," Hitoshi said.

"No one complains when Ocha does it," Toru grumbled.

"Yes, *we do,* but Ochako doesn't *care* ," Hitoshi grumbled.

"Then I don't either!" Toru said. She was the worst when she was bored and anxious.

"How are Izu and the beast doing?" Hitoshi asked.

"Still pretending to be passed out. Or... actually passed out? It's hard to tell," she said. The lack of concern in her voice was belied by the tapping on the table. She was on edge.

"And Nedzu?"

"He's... ok...?" Toru leaned forward towards the screen.

"What is '*ok'?*"

"Physically, I think he's fine. But he's gonna be pissed after this," Toru said.

"Any chance of a straight answer there? What's happening with him?" Hitoshi pressed. While many of the security guards in this room lacked imagination, Hitoshi did not. He'd been low key ready to burn the place to the ground since they muzzled Nedzu, he didn't *want* to imagine what else could have happened that Toru didn't want to tell him.

"Uh, he's got the muzzle off," she said.

"*Toru* " he said. She sighed.

"Just... stay calm, ok?"

Hitoshi stacked another card on the tower and looked at her pointedly.

"Ok, ok, Mr. Steady hands, fine," Toru huffed. "He's in a... giant hamster ball."

"A what?" Hitoshi asked. The card tower fell. Hitoshi sighed.

"You know, those clear hollow balls for-"

"I know what a damn hamster ball is, Toru. Just... what the fuck!?"

"I know, right? He's gonna be pissed."

An intercom crackled to life. "Security team to maintenance, sub floor three-alpha. Got a contained situation that requires clean up. Please confirm."

Toru pressed the com button and Hitoshi verbally confirmed.

"Well, just keep those three still and in their seats, I'll be back," Hitoshi said. If Bakugou and Izuku were not pretending, he'd have to haul their asses out covertly. Hopefully he could get a word in edgewise before he took an explosion to the face.

"Be careful, Hitoshi," Toru said, glasses swinging in his direction.

"How hard could it be?"

The second the security system locked them in, Izuku was tossed unceremoniously to the ground.

"Fuck!" Kacchan yelled, punctuated with an explosion. It was uncomfortably hot and loud in the close quarters.

"Stop!" Izuku yelped, scrambling back.

"I'm not aiming at you, nerd," Kacchan assured(?) him. Izuku rolled his eyes.

"It doesn't matter, we've been sealed in! And in a maintenance room like this, that means air tight," Izuku said.

"Then what are those vents for?" Kacchan asked.

"Is there air coming in?" Izuku asked. A couple shuffles and a tap were accompanied by another curse from Kacchan. "So, limited air supply then."

"I know what it means!" Kacchan snapped. There was a quiet hiss of air.

"Do you hear that?" Izuku asked, dread warring with hope.

"Your ears are ringing from the explosion, there's nothing," Kacchan said. Izuku grit his teeth.

"No. There's air moving. I can't smell anything for obvious reasons, can you?"

"Buncha freaking oranges," Kacchan said. "And... *damn.* That's... Those bastards are trying to *sedate us."*

Izuku took a big breath and held it. He had an idea but...

Well.

It wasn't pleasant.

"What's the plan," Kacchan asked quietly. Izuku wondered if he was hallucinating.

"I-i-i-m sorry, what?"

"That look on your face, you have a plan. What. Is. It," Kacchan asked. "Start talking, nerd, before I use your hard head as a battering ram, and I *won't* wait for you to pass out first."

"Well..."

The plan was simple. *Breathe the slime.* Use up the oxygen in the air. Wait for retrieval. Escape.

Which they did! Relatively simply. With Aizawa controlling the feed they would have the element of surprise. Unnecessary, it turned out, when Hitoshi came to let them out. Izuku was hauled over a hard shoulder (Put me down! he'd demanded, Not a chance, Kacchan had said) and rescued in an embarrassing fashion. His ears rang with explosions, even though he'd been careful to plug them with the slime.

Izuku was hauled off UA grounds like a reluctant ragdoll. Kacchan refused to put him down, even as they met up with his team. (Didn't want him to slow them down.) A towel tossed at his face had him smiling in Momo's general direction.

"So now we just need to lay low for forty-eight hours and then we can go get Nedzu," Izuku said. Even blind, he could appreciate Momo's work. The towel was soft and he felt what seemed to be ears. It was probably very cute.

"No, then we go nab Blackout," Kacchan said.

"Gentlemen! The first step is to not get caught for two days. We can plan in hiding," Momo said. There were various murmurs of agreement. The group kept moving, though Izuku still hung off Kacchan's shoulders uselessly.

"We'll split up. It's easier to hide in small groups," Kacchan said.

"Momo, will you be my buddy?" Izuku asked hopefully. Momo laughed.

"I do-"

"Deku, you're with me," Kacchan interrupted.

"Excuse me?" Izuku must have misheard.

"I said, you're with me. We have things to discuss," Kacchan said.

"We've... we've been *discussing things!* All day! It's been terrible! And you want more!?" Izuku asked.

"I've got more to say."

"I can't believe I felt hurt when you ignored me for five years. Somehow this 'open communication' is so much worse," Izuku grumbled.

"Deku!" Kacchan said.

"Fine! It's not like anything I say is going to change what you do anyway. Let's just... go wherever we can hide and then we can plan how to get Nedzu out."

"Catch Blackout," Kacchan countered.

"Whatever," Izuku said. Someone patted his head. Likely Momo.

"Well, I guess we should split here, boss," Kirishima said. Kacchan stopped abruptly.

"Don't do anything reckless," Kacchan ordered. "Keep your heads down, don't let anybody see you."

"Boss, this isn't our first rodeo," Ashido said.

"You are wearing neon leopard print," Kacchan said.

"Yeah, and my skin is bright pink. People will be looking for my neon print, meanwhile I can do a quick change in the alley. Seriously. We've got this," Ashido said.

"You've been drilling us on locations all day," Kaminari said. "We won't get lost. We're god damned *adults.*"

"Damned is right," Kacchan grumbled, quieter than Izuku would have ever given him credit for.

"What was that?" asked Jirou sharply.

"Guys! He's just worried. We'll be fine, boss," Kirishima said. And without further discussion they split.

Apparently Kacchan was capable of walking places without stomping. His boots barely made a 'tic tic' on the ground as they went. Izuku did his best to stifle his wheezing every time Kacchan's shoulder drove into his gut.

Fireman's carry was not comfortable.

Soon enough they reached their destination. Not one of Shouto's safehouses, nor anywhere near, if Izuku had tracked their progress correctly. They went up a few flights of stairs. Kacchan set him down and jingled keys as he opened a door.

"Where are we?" Izuku whispered. Kacchan ignored him, pushed past inside for a quick sweep of the place. Izuku waited quietly, hardly breathing.

"Clear," Kacchan breathed. "Your defunct ex-microwave isn't the only one who can maintain safe houses. Come on."

Izuku felt his way forward, brushing past Kacchan to the door and hallway inside. He nearly tripped on the entryway until he remembered to shuffle his feet forward. He was mildly surprised Kacchan wasn't impatiently pushing him inside and huffing about his fumbling. In fact, Kacchan hadn't moved at all.

"I'm sorry," Kacchan said quietly from behind, a hand coming to rest on Izuku's back.

Um.

"I'm sorry, wha-" Izuku was shoved forward. He spun around to confront Kacchan but the door was slammed in Izuku's face. Izuku hissed in pain as his nose got the brunt of it. He scrambled for the door knob, but it wouldn't budge.

"Kacchan! *What the fuck!*" he yelled. "Open the goddamn door!"

"No." The lock clicked into place. The deadbolt lever was missing on this side of the door. *This had been planned.* "This is for your own good."

Sticky hot rage bloomed in Izuku's chest.

"You have three days worth of food and supplies," Kacchan said through the door. "You'll be safe and we'll come get you once it's over."

"Safe!?" Izuku sputtered. "*Fuck* safe! Nedzu is-"

"Nedzu has Aizawa," Kacchan said. "He doesn't need you. Nobody needs you! Just, *stay here!"*

Tears burned at the edges of Izuku's eyes.

"Traitor!" Izuku shouted. Arguments spun and spluttered through his mind, but nothing stuck out through the haze of anger. Inarticulate sounds escaped his throat. He pounded a fist on the door.

How could he? How could he do this now!? He had expected pain and still, it hurt like a sucker punch. How the hell could he feel so betrayed when he'd never trusted Kacchan in the first place?

"I know you can't understand right now. I get that you hate me," Kacchan said. "I'm sorry, alright?!"

It figured that when Kacchan finally apologized it would be during some new torment. What good was an apology when the guilty party was currently offending? *Don't be a martyr, Kacchan, it doesn't suit you.*

"It's not your *job* to keep me safe," Izuku ground out. "I am a pro-he-"

"You're blind! You're retired!"

"I've been getting by fine!" Izuku said.

"He wants you *dead,* Izuku," Kacchan said. His voice was rough, but the volume was low. Izuku gave a bitter laugh.

"Who doesn't?"

"*I* don't," Kacchan said. Izuku paused. Kacchan was... scared?

"Look," Izuku panted, trying to catch his breath. "Let's talk. Not... not through the door. We have time Kacchan, we can figure something out. I can *help*, even if I don't do any fighting."

"The second I open this door you're going to try something," Kacchan said. "So no. You stay."

How the fuck could he still know him so well?

"I deserve a chance to help with this, Kacchan. I've already done so much," Izuku pleaded. Izuku had been useful. He and Nedzu were a team. "This is what my life is *for."*

"If something happened to you... I couldn't do that to Aunty Inko," Kacchan said.

"What about *me!* Why doesn't it matter what you're doing to *me*?" Izuku yelled.

"It isn't up to you anymore," Kacchan said. "This isn't your fault, it's mine. I'm not going to let you just... throw yourself away like that. I know I haven't been a very good friend," (*Or acquaintance, colleague or fellow human being*) "So I'm going to fix this."

Izuku just breathed, wishing he could use his nose. *Thanks, Kacchan.* All the calming techniques were very insistent; in through the nose and all that. Kacchan stepped away.

"Come *back*, you coward!" Izuku screamed at the door. There was no reply but fading footsteps. He was alone. He thumped his head against the wall and let the tears fall. He'd really hoped... he'd thought that...

But then when had what he thought ever mattered?

Izuku had a little less than two days to feel sorry for himself, not that he planned on staying put for that long. He had some time to let himself just *feel.* He'd get something to eat, have a nap maybe and. Well. He'd figure it out. Life had never been kind to him. He had a routine for these kinds of situations (when people disappointed him and he was left inevitably holding the bag.) Rest and food and a shower would do wonders.

Shower *first*, actually.

It would just be a little harder in a completely unfamiliar place. He'd been playing life on hard mode this whole time, what was another set back? Izuku took in a big shuddery breath and squared his shoulders. As he went to turn into the room he felt the little hairs on his neck stand on end. Something was off... something had changed.

He wasn't alone.

"With friends like that, who needs enemies?" came an amused voice.

From the supposedly empty room.

That Izuku was locked in.

Fuck .

Shouto was terrible at whistling. This didn't stop him from practicing with single minded focus. Off key breathy notes echoed off the concrete walls. Rocklock glared at him from outside the cell.

"You have to actually purse your lips," he said. "You aren't playing the flute."

"I can't play the flute," Shouto said. "I think." He hadn't actually tried. Maybe he was a secret prodigy. It would certainly be better than being a glorified barbeque and freezer combo. "Do you think maybe I could?"

"I am not going to give you one, the attempted whistling is bad enough," Rocklock said. "Like this," he whistled a simple scale, warbling the last note. Shouto stared.

"Teach me," he demanded.

"No! For the last time, no!" Fatgum shouted. He was currently laying on a bench near the wall, arm tossed dramatically over his face.

"Maybe I should get you a jug," Rocklock mused. "That might be more your style."

"Oh my god," Fatgum whimpered.

"Why a jug?" Shouto asked. Rocklock looked like he was about to launch into a very interesting conversation when a door was slammed open.

"Shouto!" came a familiar unwelcome shout. Shouto iced half his cell in reflex.

"Endeavor," Shouto greeted. The flaming giant came to a stop in front of Shouto's cell, glaring at a smirking Rocklock and a reclining Fatgum.

"What were you thinking?" Endeavor hissed, like he could somehow keep their conversation private from the other two men in the room. Shouto lifted a brow.

"I was thinking maybe I could get into music," Shouto said. "I think I might have a hidden talent."

"Noooo," groaned Fatgum.

"You don't," Rocklock said.

"You don't *know* that," Shouto said.

"I-"

"Do you mind?" Endeavor asked Shouto's guards. "I am trying to talk some *sense* to my *son* ."

"I don't mind, no," said Rocklock. Much like his quirk, he was immovable. Eventually Endeavor gave up trying to intimidate him and went back to glaring at Shouto.

"Is it not enough," Endeavor started, and Shouto could feel the promise of the lecture buried in that low tone. "That you must humiliate this family with your ridiculous antics? Is it not enough that your private life is-"

"Delete message," Shouto said blandly. There was a 'whumph' of flame. Endeavor briefly lost the ability to speak. Shouto thought he may have achieved a new record.

"Is this a joke to you?" Endeavor finally managed. There had been a lot of other words mouthed before they got to this point, but Shouto was actually terrible at lip reading. He was on the fence whether that was a blessing or disappointment at the moment.

Shouto considered the question. So many options. Did he want to extend the conversation for humorous retellings in the future, or did he want to skip to the end where his father stormed out.

Trick question.

"Yes," Shouto said.

"These are lives you're playing with!" Endeavor roared. "Are we just a punchline to you?"

"You are, yes," Shouto said. Endeavor continued like he hadn't been interrupted.

"Do you not realize you are in prison right now? Did you not think of all the people you would drag down with you? This is serious, Shouto, I might not be able to protect you here. You could become convicted-"

"I'm not asking for your help," Shouto said.

"You- You... *you could lose your license*- !"

"I expect so, yes," Shouto said.

"You wouldn't be a *hero* -"

"That would be the consequence of losing my license," Shouto agreed.

"Not just you, even, Uravity would be indicted too," Endeavor said. He'd gradually stopped waving his arms as much, tone lowered from 'thundering' to 'heated'. He watched Shouto carefully. Shouto felt like he was actually seeing him. "Without being a hero in good standing, you wouldn't be able to do anything for her. For any of your friends."

"My friends can handle themselves," Shouto said. Endeavor stared at him. Ice dripped as it melted.

"This was *premeditated* . You. You actually *intended* ..." Endeavor said.

"I never intended to be discovered, but my hand was forced," Shouto said.

"Why!?" Endeavor asked. Shouto took a minute to regard his father. Two. Endeavor waited.

This was unprecedented.

"Do you actually intend to listen to me?" Shouto asked. Something painfully like hope flickered in his chest. Absurd; he had outgrown the need for validation long ago.

Endeavor nodded.

Shouto sighed. "The hero system we have today is corrupt."

He waited for his father to interrupt. Nothing came.

"Anyone who doesn't meet with an arbitrary list of desirable features is failed by it. For every person rescued from a raging villain, seven more are injured without recourse. Heroes are punished for doing the right thing if it doesn't align politically," Shouto said. "I didn't become a hero to further anyone else's agenda. That includes yours."

"Shouto..."

"No. I did what a hero should do. The right thing. It is society that is wrong."

Shouto waited a moment. Endeavour said nothing, only watched. His expression was more open than anything Shouto had ever seen. Had they ever just... been honest before? Maybe...

"But it's not just society as a whole. There's a villain," Shouto started. Maybe... maybe if he could

make his father understand...

"A villain?" Endeavor asked. Rocklock and Fatgum perked up as well.

Shouto nodded. "He's powerful, but not physically. He has been playing a game from the shadows this whole time. Five years ago it started with Nedzu disappearing, and then Izuku found..."

"Deku," Endeavor growled, flames heating.

"Yes, we didn't know he even existed until Izuku-"

"This whole thing, it's because of *Deku,*" Endeavor growled. Shouto felt like he'd missed a step.

"What are you-"

"Shouto, I will fix this," Endeavor said. "Stay here, don't say anything to anyone. I'll be back."

"Wait-!" Shouto called, but Endeavor was already gone.

What the actual fresh hell was this?

"So, uh, *that* happened," Rocklock said.

"What have I done," Shouto said, head dropping to his hands.

"Kinda seems like your dad went to arrest and/or murder Deku."

"He came up with that all on his own," Shouto said. "Right? I didn't say anything that would have..."

"No, that was legit fucked," Rocklock agreed. "Is he... always like that?"

"No. He usually doesn't give me a chance to finish a sentence," Shouto said.

"Not that this isn't... something," Fatgum said. Shouto and Rocklock looked at him. "But what were you saying about a villain?"

Chapter End Notes

Been looking forward to this for three months :)

In other news, no update next week. Need more time to smooth out these ending chapters.

Fail Forward

Chapter Summary

Nedzu is in trouble.
Izuku is in trouble.
Bakugou is trouble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nedzu was not sure how or when, but he was going to turn this hamster ball to his advantage.

Currently, he was amusing himself by scuffing the furniture. The plastic was disproportionately thick for a ball of this size. It was merely a resized toy, thanks to the size exchange quirk, sealed with some nails along the opening. It also smelled of hamster.

They had put *Nedzu* in a *used hamster ball.*

He ran it into the desk, chipping a small corner off the wood. The current principal had replaced all the furniture in the head office. It was bright, clean, and hideously tacky.

Nedzu rammed it again.

"How long are you going to continue this tantrum?" Dr Aku asked from the desk.

Nedzu glared at him. He'd disposed of the muzzle several hours ago, but had yet to speak. The idea was to survive the next two days *without* incident. His jaw *ached* with unspoken vitriol.

Nedzu reached a claw through one of the large slits in the ball. He stared at Dr Aku as he drew the claw down the wood finish, the scraping loud in the silence. Dr Aku's eye twitched.

"That's it," he said. He picked up the hamster ball, giving it a good shake to keep Nedzu off balance. The shards of the muzzle rattled around beside him. Dr Aku wedged it in the corner behind a couch. "I don't have time to deal with you right now, little mouse, but don't think you aren't making it worse for yourself."

Dr Aku went back to his desk. A small cage held one of the weird squirrels that remained docile and limp (alive?) while the doctor fiddled with a machine beside it. Nedzu was not interested in the memories conjured by such a setup.

The screen on the wall behind him flickered. Dr Aku didn't show any sign of noticing it. It flickered again, and briefly showed any empty maintenance room. Slime still stained the floor. Another flicker, and a smiling Aizawa made a brief appearance. The screen went dark just as quickly.

Nedzu nearly collapsed with relief. Midoriya was fine. Things were in hand. He could repurpose the part of his brain that had been exhaustively playing out worst case scenarios.

Nedzu stuck a claw through one of the ball's air vents. He smiled as it caught a thread from the

couch.

He began to pull.

Izuku put up a fight.

Not a *good* one by any stretch of the imagination, but a messy one. There was no way in hell he was going to be accused of leaving the safe house of his own volition.

(Not that it hadn't been the *original* plan)

Izuku slammed his hand against the wall as his assailant tackled him. Nothing said 'unwilling victim' like smeared bloody handprints on the wall. Izuku gasped as they landed, a heavy torso driving the air out of his lungs. The man was on his feet before Izuku, so Izuku kicked out in the direction of harsh breathing.

"Holy fuck," the man grunted. "Just hold-"

Izuku's foot was caught. He brought up the other one to knock his opponent off balance, but that was caught too. A quiet *snk* and suddenly his ankles were bound together.

Shit. This was the welding quirk. Yu- Yu-something. Yogu?

"Oh my god," said his assailant, dropping both Izuku's feet to the ground. Izuku drew his knees to his chest, braced his shoulder against the floor and...

Kick, a solid hit to the chest. He heard the man stumble backwards, gasping.

"You have no idea-" the man panted.

Izuku rolled over to get his knees under him.

"-when to quit!" A large hand was on the back of Izuku's neck, forcing his face down into the carpet. Another hand caught one of his wrists and wrenched it back. Izuku screamed in half pain, half fury. He tried to roll out of the pin but legs braced against either side of his body. There was a prick at his neck.

And the floor rolled away from under him.

"I thought the boss was *joking* when he said I'd need this," the man said, moving away. Izuku rolled and rolled but the carpet remained pressed against the side of his face. His other hand flopped instead of bracing himself up.

"That's it," the man said, taking a step forward.

"Fuck *you* ," said Izuku. Or... he thought it. His lips were numb.

"Yeah, you are covered in goo. It's gross," the man said. "I am asking for a raise after this."

He rolled Izuku over onto his back (and Izuku kept rolling and rolling and not moving at all) Izuku clenched a weak fist, but his punch was caught easily. Izuku's awareness stuttered and suddenly he was in the bathtub, water pouring down over his head and clothes. His hands were stuck in front of him.

"I am *not* carrying you out while you're covered in slime," the man muttered. "Most people don't-"

Izuku tipped forward, his hands went *tnk* against the metal faucet and stuck. Izuku was shivering (or was it an earthquake?) and some part of his mind noted that while he couldn't pull away from the faucet, whatever was binding his hands rolled along it instead of being stuck fast.

It wasn't a welding quirk, it was a magnetizing quirk.

The rest of his mind was currently trying to escape through his stomach. He was so *tired* and *hurt* and he just wanted to sleep, but the ground kept moving and tilting and he had to tell Nedzu something.

Izuku threw up.

"Of for *fucks sake* ," the man grumbled. Water washed down the front of him. Izuku shivered. His face hurt. "You're making it worse!"

Where was Nedzu? Izuku jerked when he thought he heard a squeak, but it was just metal scraping on metal. He had to...

"Magnets," Izuku said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there were maggots. God, I give up. I'll just get some sheets or something. You're riding in the trunk," the man said.

The water shut off and Izuku was left dripping for an eternity. The earthquake got worse. Izuku tried to hide under something.

Izuku woke to his clothes being pressed against him, uncomfortably wet. His arms were bound to his sides and pressure came from all over. Had be been buried? Was he stuck now? His stomach rested on something hard. It was so dark.

"How can you weigh so much? You're so *small,* " someone was saying. It smelled like gas now. Like gas, and bile and slime.

Izuku felt *gross.*

He needed to... to...

Footsteps crunched under them as they went somewhere. Alarm bells were ringing in Izuku's head, but all he could do was sing along.

"Shut up!" a voice hissed, and then his knees were in his chest and something closed overtop.

Izuku wasn't ready to die!

He tried to kick, but only succeeded in jostling himself a little. He was resting on a bed of felt as they lowered his body in the coffin in the ground in the...

Izuku is not sure how long he felt like he was falling. The next thing he was aware of was cool air and a gasp. Then he woke again while sitting on a chair. He apologized for his appearance, he wasn't a very good guest. He would appreciate some tea though.

(Nedzu would appreciate tea.)

Then he awoke again and the ground had stopped trembling but he was wet.

And again, and his arms hurt from where they were twisted behind him.

And again, someone was murmuring. Something was touching his face.

And again, his shirt was gone but he was wrapped in towels.

And then he woke up for real.

He was in a quiet place. Distant city noises could be heard through the wall, but only if you listened for them. It felt warm, muffled, like a home. Hotel room?

Izuku was sitting in a chair, slumped forward onto a hard surface. A table, likely. He felt somewhat dry, but his hair was still damp. Towels rested around his shoulders and over his back. His pants were still clinging uncomfortably to him. His hands were bound behind him through the back of the chair. Each of his ankles were bound to a leg.

Binding... binding... there was something about binding rattling around in his head. *No, first order of business was to find out if he was alone.*

"Hello?" Izuku said. His throat was dry and hoarse.

Something shuffled around to his right. Izuku flipped his head in that direction.

Oh that was a mistake. His head *hurt.* More importantly, someone was there but not answering him. Izuku let out the most pitiful whine. It didn't actually fix anything but it was damn cathartic. It was also a one question personality quiz for the unknown person. No swearing or violence yet, which was already a marked improvement over Kacchan.

Izuku took a breath and it rattled in his chest. He coughed, which kicked off a hacking fit. His ribs ached and his throat burned and suddenly he was coughing into a towel held in front of his face.

"Shit shit, don't die, it's fine," a voice said. A young voice.

Izuku panicked mildly, trying to lift away from the towel but it followed him. He needed to breathe, he needed to...

"Oh gross, just... ugh. Gross. Use the towel," the kid said. A part of Izuku recognized the kid *wasn't* trying to smother him and coughed into the towel. Izuku had thought crawling through the slime had been bad, the aftermath was way worse. Eventually he got control over his breathing and stopped coughing. The towel was thrown away onto the floor.

Carefully breathing past the tickle in his throat, Izuku tried to sort through the jumble of memories he had of the last... whenever. He skipped over the jagged emotions over whatever the hell Kacchan had been thinking and tried to string together a timeline.

He'd been alone in a safehouse, and then not. He'd been tackled, he'd fought and then... something... Dreamlike impressions of a fight that went poorly. Water. Earthquake. Being buried. A squeak?

But *not* Nedzu.

"Where am I?" Izuku asked. His internal impressions were useless; a nauseating dream of defeat. He needed third party input.

"I'm not supposed to say," said the kid.

"Who are you?" Izuku asked. The lack of violence was promising. No other voice chimed in to keep the kid from talking, even if the kid wasn't giving him much.

"I... I'm no one. Not important," the kid said. Not *I can't say,* not *I'm not supposed to.*

"What *can* you tell me?"

"Yugo said not to talk to you," the kid said. *Yet the kid was talking.* He was either lonely, rebellious or used to obeying the perceived authority of an adult, even when said adult was bound to a chair.

"And-" Izuku was interrupted by more coughing as his throat finally rebelled. Something small poked at his face and he turned away.

"It's just tea, with a straw," the kid said. Izuku gratefully took a sip of cooled tea, drowning out the internal alarm that it might be drugged with the burning in his throat.

Couldn't ask questions if he couldn't talk . Besides, these people had a disturbing fondness for needles. No reason for them to go off-brand.

"And where's Yugo?" Izuku asked. Yugo was the one with a welding quirk, according to Aizawa. Which meant his bindings had no key. Even if he could get the kid on side there would be nothing he could do about them. *Something felt off about that, though.*

"Out. Away? He's not here. Shut up," the kid seemed to be realizing he was alone with a prisoner. He was getting flustered.

"They left you here with me? *Alone?* " Izuku asked. This kid was no hardened thug. He was too eager to answer questions, too quick to offer comfort. It was possible they were underestimating Izuku, but the drugging and the firm bindings suggested otherwise. Why would...

"You aren't going anywhere," the kid said. It wasn't a question. It was *fact,* and...

"You're the one with a foresight quirk," Izuku said. He knew Izuku wasn't going anywhere because Izuku *wasn't going anywhere.*

"How-how... *no!* " the kid's voice cracked. "No I'm not! You're-you can't even move! It's just obvious!"

Izuku shrugged. The *lie* was obvious, he knew the truth. Arguing with the kid wasn't going to do anything except annoy the both of them. Izuku needed to be careful about what he gave away at *any* point in this conversation, at least until he understood more. "How long have I been out?"

"A-a few hours," the kid said, settling as they moved away from the more sensitive topic.

"Were you the one who gave me the towels?" Izuku asked.

"You were shivering," the kid said softly. "I had to... had to cut your shirt, but... well... I didn't know what else to do..."

"Thank you," Izuku said. "The shirt was probably pretty gross."

"Yeah," the kid said, sitting down across from him. Ceramic slid across wood. "I didn't really think about it, and then you didn't have a shirt, so then I-"

"Kid, it's fine. You did good," Izuku assured him. Whoever this kid was, it was hard to imagine him being on board with Blackout's methods. He was nervous enough to possibly be another

victim, but had enough freedom to make Izuku doubt it. It's possible he didn't *know.* Unlikely, with a foresight quirk.

Unlikely, with a bound and beaten hero at the table.

But the kid didn't like seeing him cold. He didn't like seeing him cough without helping. What was his part in all this? Izuku's gut said this was the person with the foresight quirk, but he'd not encountered such an insecure mess since he looked in the mirror ten years ago.

As much as he hated it, there was merit to the idea that knowing someone's quirk helped you to know the person. It was such a defining characteristic that being quirkless made you socially off putting. How could you have a personality, after all, with no quirk to drive it?

Without meeting the man, Blackout fit the mold of someone who disadvantaged others before trying to better himself. Conversely, Aizawa's quirk made him more of an equalizer, someone who saw your true merit without the fluff. Shouto was a wild card, all over the place and all the more brittle for it.

The last, and only, foresight quirk Izuku had come across had made the man single-mindedly confident. He could only see one future, and it was *always* correct. (Even when it wasn't)

Would learning the kid's personality give clues to knowing his quirk? How much was circumstance, how much was innate?

(How long did Izuku have until none of it mattered at all?)

Izuku shut *that* line of thinking down right away. You tended to head in the direction you were looking, so he firmly fixed his focus on the future where he figured out the kid's quirk. (And survived to use the knowledge)

What did he know?

Well, Nedzu seemed convinced there were televisions involved. So. An external effect. Blackout being involved was another point in that theory's favor. It was linked to vision, likely of the quirk user. Blackout's utility and the televisions both backed that one. Izuku being blind *and* a target reduced the likelihood of the kid being able to show things from another person's view.

If quirks and personalities were actually linked... well. The kid was *unsure* . So it was likely he could see more than one future. See: multiple televisions and utility of blindness as supporting factors.

Which brought them to the trigger. It was possible the kid could just *will* it. It didn't require physical contact with the subjects. The news articles though... perhaps he could see different displays of the same paper? Or the televisions, see alternate videos from different futures?

"What if...?" Izuku started to mutter.

Then there was a towel on his head.

"No!" the kid shouted at him. Izuku paused in confusion. What had he done? He'd barely moved. He barely *could* move. "Shut up!"

Ah. *What had he said?* Izuku was fairly sure he'd been quiet for most of his thought process. It had only been at the end where he was musing...

"What-"

And a hand clamped over his face, muffling his question. He'd been asking questions the whole time. Had the kid just had enough? Eventually the pressure over his mouth eased and Izuku was able to suck in air with deep gasping breaths.

"I'm sorry!" the kid said. "Just... just *don't..."*

"Don't what?" Izuku tested the water with a hopefully innocent question. No frantic hands hitting his face, so far so good. So it wasn't *questions* in general.

"I'm not even supposed to be talking to you," the kid said. "If I had just *listened* ..."

The kid was moving further away. He flopped onto what was likely a couch or a bed.

"I'm not trying to get you into trouble, kid," Izuku said softly. "And I'm trying not to upset you. Maybe you could tell me what I said wrong?"

"Just... don't ask me 'what if'," the kid blurted.

Interesting.

The kid seemed to pick up on Izuku's quiet go from 'perplexed' to 'calculating'.

"Not! Not that it means anything. I just don't like it? I... it just-"

"Triggers your quirk," Izuku said. The kid made a strangled noise.

"You're not supposed to *know* that! How do you know that? I didn't *say* anything..."

"Hey, it's ok, I already had theories." Which the kid had just confirmed. "And what do you think I'm going to do, tattle on you?" Izuku asked. The kid was silent. *The kid was under socialized.* "I don't have any plans to get you in trouble. My main concern is escaping with my life."

"You escaping *will* get me in trouble," the kid said in a moan.

"Then I'll focus on *staying alive.* Kid, I don't want to be your enemy."'

"It's too late," the kid said.

"What, this abduction and tying to the chair? That's nothing. You should see what my friends-"

"You don't understand!"

"Probably not, but I can listen." Izuku could always listen.

"I- you- how do I-?" The kid laughed, or perhaps sobbed. Oh, there's the shaky inhale. Definitely a sob.

"It's okay, take your time," Izuku said. He hated how patronizing he sounded, but responding to someone in distress was bone-deep.

"I need- *dammit,* I'm such a *baby* ," the kid wailed.

"Kid you are currently talking to the former pro-hero that was almost dubbed 'the crying hero' by class election," Izuku said.

"You-?"

"Think I've already cried twice today... oh, what day is it? Could be as much as five," Izuku said. Crying was a pressure valve and there had been a whole lot of pressure these past week. Izuku could *and had* written essays on the benefits of tears. Explaining that one to Mr Aizawa after an all-nighter had been... interesting.

"It's... thursday?" the kid said.

"Love the confidence. Honestly it doesn't help, I've had a hard time telling time since I trashed my sleeping schedule." What month was it, even?

"And you're b-b-blind," the kid said with a tremble in his voice.

"Doesn't actually have as much to do with it as you would think," Izuku said. Izuku usually broke time into cases as opposed to the more socially acceptable days and months.

"What's... what's it like?"

"Seriously? This-" Izuku sighed. *Patience.* "Sorry. It's dark. I can't see. I've got permanent bruises on my legs. It's pretty much what you would expect?"

"But how do you- *you can't see,* how can you do... anything!?"

There was more fear there than warranted by a hypothetical. *Shit, Izuku, you fool.* "He's used it on you before, then?"

"It's... so dark. I couldn't do anything. It was- *it was* -"

"It's okay to be afraid," Izuku said gently.

"I *hate* being so scared. How do you- how can you just-"

"It's never *just* anything. Being blind is... different. You have to be more careful, but you can still 'do things' if you set things up right. If you have someone you can trust." Izuku was one to talk. He'd holed up in his apartment for a month because he couldn't trust anyone, or trust they wouldn't get hurt. Who knew how long it would have taken him to get out if Nedzu hadn't shown up? Once he had, though... well. It had been game changing.

"But-! But there's... who's going to help *me?* And if I can't do it on my own, what *good* am I?"

God, it was like meeting himself ten years ago. "Kid..."

"I don't... I don't *deserve* help! I *shot* someone-!" the kid's breath was coming faster. Izuku shifted towards him. "I-I *actually* shot someone, and all this-"

"Hey, hey, slow down, what are you talking about?"

"He said, *he said* , the gun had blanks, but it was too *heavy* ," the kid was talking too fast, his voice intense with the weight of confession. "I knew something bad was going to happen, but I just thought it would *look* bad, but I actually..."

"Breathe."

The kid took a couple gasping breaths. "But if I didn't... if I *don't* ... Then! Any future that's *wrong* is a future he blinds me! And I'm so scared! I am *so scared of* ... of ending up like you!"

Thanks, kid.

"But you make it look like it's *nothing!* And here I am, shooting people to avoid it!" the kid said, a note of hysteria in his voice.

"It's okay to be afraid," Izuku said. First you were afraid, and then you fueled *that* into adrenaline and spite. Izuku may or may not have a healthy relationship with fear. There was also something in Izuku that went completely calm when someone else was afraid, and the kid reeked of fear.

"Is it ok to *shoot someone* because you were *afraid?* " the kid demanded.

"Generally not," Izuku agreed. "What did you think was going to happen when you pulled the trigger?"

"A loud noise? I don't know, I thought it was a blank! Whatever... whatever a blank is?"

"So you *didn't know* . Would you have still pulled the trigger if you knew the gun was loaded?"

"I... I. I *should have known* . I should-"

"Did you *know* something was going to go wrong?" Izuku felt bad using the kid's guilt to pry, but he only needed to wiggle his wrists slightly to remember how dire his situation was.

"I didn't *look* . He told me I didn't have to look, that he would figure it all out. That I could *trust him* . And then there weren't blanks in the gun."

Izuku wasn't one hundred percent sure what had gone down with Hitoshi's trap, but he remembered the retort of the gun. He knew it hadn't been Hitoshi that got shot. The kid pouring his heart out to Izuku now wasn't the kid they had profiled as Blackout's ally. This was a kid caught up in something bigger than he could handle. *This was a pressure point that might keep Izuku alive.*

(This was a chance to save someone he hadn't know needed saving)

"But now you know," Izuku said softly. "You know you can't trust him."

The kid made a strangled whine.

"You can do *better* ," Izuku insisted.

"He said it was *necessary* ," the kid said. "That it wasn't my fault."

"That doesn't stop you from feeling guilty, though, does it?"

"He... you don't know what he would *do to me if* -"

"I think I have a fair idea," Izuku said.

"He doesn't have his quirk anymore!" the kid shouted. "It won't be just... *painless* anymore. It... I can't do it, Mr Deku, I can't!"

"Doesn't sound like you're ok now, though, either," Izuku said. He would have to walk a fine line. The kid had no taste for villainy, but he was scared. Izuku needed to find the tipping point that pushed the kid into action. Hopefully the right action.

"You really think he'd ever just *let me go?* My quirk..." the kid swallowed. "My quirk is too *valuable* . He'd never just let me go."

"Your quirk is *your* advantage."

"I'm just a *kid!"* the kid said.

"Yeah, and how long is that excuse going to work? You're what, sixteen? You got two years and then what's your excuse going to be, that it's all you've ever known?"

"I-"

Izuku waited for the kid to catch his breath. Find his place.

"Mr Saki was the only one... the *only* one who helped me when I needed it," the kid said.

"It doesn't sound like he's helping you very much now," Izuku countered.

"Before him, everything was so much *worse* ."

"And now, things could stand to be *better,* " Izuku insisted. Normally he wouldn't gloss over someone's bitter backstory, but there wasn't time now. He needed a specific outcome. He would pay for his sins later.

"You don't understand! He- he *helped me-!"*

"Do you want to keep helping him? Even if it means other people get hurt? You don't have to do this," Izuku said. Izuku needed something substantial. Something more than platitudes of 'you can be good if you try!'. Something more than a childish pep talk.

He needed to *show him.*

"How can I not!? I... can't. He'll..." the kid sobbed quietly. Izuku's mind ticked through questions. 'What if' had so many possibilities, and Izuku only had one shot. If he got this wrong he'd break any tentative trust the kid had in him so far. Any ground he'd made.

There was a logic to these things, like a riddle. Izuku was getting nowhere with it. There were still too many variables. Sometimes, though, reason and logic were just a crutch. They could help you come up with solutions but ultimately when it came down to it...

He went with his gut.

"What if I saved you?" Izuku said quickly. Before the kid could stop him. Before the kid realized what he had done.

"Wha-"

Static buzzed from the television.

The last thing anyone expected Katsuki to do was to approach a takedown *quietly.*

Therefore it was something he did *a lot.*

Kyouka sat in the lobby, head bobbing away under headphones. Sunset darkened the sky outside,

electric street lights still unsure about flickering on. Katsuki hid in plain sight in a bellboy outfit. With an outfit slightly too big, a slouch and his face slackened into neutral apathy everyone just passed on by. He'd been quietly taken to task twice by the shift manager before he'd managed to covertly flash his license.

No one had bothered him since.

Hanta was stuck up around the ceiling somewhere, hiding in the shadows of what was probably an architect's dissertation. Denki and Mina were incapable of subtlety, so he'd sent them three blocks away to do autographs and PR. They were incapable of not being dramatic about anything, so he'd have plenty to yell at them about tomorrow when he read the journalist's interpretation.

Eijirou had been booked into the room beside their most likely target. He'd be free to nervously pace and worry until the action started.

Katsuki noticed a man walk in. Clean lines. Colorful suit.

Smug bastardly face.

Katsuki clenched a fist. "He's here," he said into the coms. Quiet affirmatives were returned. Katsuki trailed the guy at a distance before he got into an elevator. Katsuki waited just long enough to see him hit the seventh floor before going for the stairs.

"Red Riot, he's on seventh, you're up," Katsuki said.

"Roger that, Boss," Eijirou said.

Katsuki pushed open the door to the stairway. He was halfway to the first stair when he noticed the woman. She stood directly in the middle of his path and was looking at him with eyes wide and wet enough to give the ocean a run for its money. His immediate suspicion was burned away by the unmistakable flame of hero worship in her eyes.

"You're... oh my god, you *are* Ground Zero!" she said, intensity radiating like a malignant aura. Katsuki felt the headache start behind his left eye.

"No," he said, stepping to one side. She was right there in front of him again.

"You *are!* " she said, leaning into his space.

"Ma'am, I am *trying* to do my *job,* " he grit out. Katsuki didn't give ground, as a general rule, but the single minded focus of this woman took him aback. He could move her out of the way, but that had never ended well for him before.

"Marry me," she breathed. In an unexpected display of self-awareness, she blushed immediately and started stammering. "I-I-I mean, just, no, *too soon! I can't believe I said that! To him! I'm talking to Ground Zero!* "

There came the ache behind his right eye. He didn't have time for this. Carefully, he put one hand on each of her upper arms, lifted her and switched their position on the steps.

She looked like she was going to faint.

Katsuki leaned her against the wall, let go and turned to go back to his mission. He was stopped by a death grip on his elbow.

"Ground Zero picked me up," she said with great gravity. Was she... telling Katsuki?

"Let go of me," he growled.

"I am never going to wash this suit again," she said dreamily. *Oh she absolutely should, but actually... why did he even care?*

"You could be arrested for assault," he snapped. Somehow, this made the woman giggle giddily.

"I'm going to be *arrested by Ground Zero!"* she squealed.

"No! Let *go!* " he shook his arm but she maintained her grip with fannish strength. Was this the source of Deku's power? Had he somehow turned his delusional plans to reality by harnessing his hero worship?

(Deku was *safe,* Katsuki didn't need to worry about him now. Soon enough this would all be over and the actual threat would be neutralized)

"Just... let me get a pen! I want... I *need* an autograph!" she said, clinging to the sleeve of his jacket than he was half out of.

Great, now she had a goal. Katsuki stopped struggling. He fished out the permanent marker he always kept with him.

"Fine. Give me a paper or whatever," he said. She looked at him with owl eyes, stunned into inaction.

"I don't have any paper," she said.

"Whatever."

Kastuki signed her face.

He managed to get up the first flight of steps before she snapped out of her overjoyed stupor.

"Wait!" she cried.

Oh, fuck stealth. He blasted up the remaining five floors, ruining his outfit in the process. He tore the blackened sleeves off as he slammed open the seventh floor door. Eijirou was already standing quietly and nervously just beside their suspected room. Katsuki quieted his steps, motioning Eijirou into position.

Kastuki braced himself, met Eijirou's gaze and nodded. They kicked down the door in unison and stepped into the lit hotel room. Blackout sat unconcerned by the window. Something in the back of Katsuki's head rang in warning, but before he could analyze it Hanta burst in through the window.

There was no time for hesitation in the field. Katsuki, Eijirou and Hanta worked quickly and efficiently. Blackout was in cuffs.

Minimal resistance.

Katsuki stared down at the man, stance tight and controlled. Something wasn't right. This wasn't over, but for the life of him he couldn't see the threat.

"You think you've won?" Blackout said, smiling far too sharply for someone in his position. The feeling that Katsuki was missing something important doubled. "You think you have any idea of

what's actually going on?"

"You're the one sitting *quirkless* in handcuffs, buddy," Hanta said.

Oh for... "Do not engage," Katsuki growled at him.

"Oh, I'm just getting started," Blackout said. That was a smile hauntingly similar to Deku's the moment before he pulled off something annoyingly impossible. "After all, I don't need a quirk to cause a *blackout* ."

The building rumbled beneath them, secondary explosions echoing like thunder. The lights surged and flickered in time with an unhealthy electric buzzing.

The lights went out.

And Blackout was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Everything is puns. All the way down. There is no substance.

Blackout

Chapter Notes

> Every chapter I think it will be too simple. Add in some plot, fill in that white space, I think. And then the characters start talking and I end up with these monsters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Someone had found the barricaded corridor an hour ago. Ochako watched the piled furniture shake with each 'thump' from the outside. Either someone had a strength enhancer, or they had fashioned a battering ram. She wondered what weight they punched at.

"They've cut the feed," Aizawa said from behind her. Ochako jumped. *Shit, he was quiet!* She could read the lecture on situational awareness in his eyes.

"Sorry, Sensei," she said sheepishly. His expression aged him ten years. *How old was he, anyway?*

"You are an adult pro-hero, I am not your sensei," he said. "I am not responsible for you."

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. Ochako politely ignored him. "Where is Hitoshi? Nedzu?"

"Still in the same place, last I looked. Nedzu has finished de-upholstering the couch. We need to leave," he said. Ochako nodded, wedging the few remaining tables against the pile at the door.

"Vents? Windows?" Ochako asked.

"Vents," he said decisively, glaring at a large one on the other side of the hall. "We'll cross and exit on the other side of the building. Less likely to have eyes out there."

Ochako was so glad she wasn't alone. She never would have thought of that!

(She'd been planning on weaponizing the blockade, to take out as many as she could before they realized her trap.)

Sensei's plan was much more reasonable!

(So much less violent.)

It was a moment's work to get them to the ceiling, and another to unscrew the vent on one side. Ever since that one underwater mission with Deku, Ochako had never underestimated the utility of a screwdriver. Aizawa wrenched the plate open and then back into place after her. They scuttled a fair distance down the surprisingly roomy vent before they heard the clatter of the failing barricade.

The shouts sounded too close behind them.

(Maybe she should have left some traps regardless)

Ochako felt the thrill of adrenaline and they shot down the channel. Zero gravity allowed them to

slide quickly along, only barely stopping themselves quietly at the junction. Aizawa took them off to the left and then Ochako stopped trying to figure out where they were, focusing only on launching and stopping quietly. She trusted Aizawa to lead them true.

"Stop humming," he hissed.

"Sorry, Sensei," she apologized.

"Oh my god," he muttered.

"What?"

In lieu of answering, he popped open another vent cover. Ochako followed behind into an empty room. Large windows framed a beautiful sunset. They were several stories off the ground. Aizawa took a total of zero seconds to admire the view. He had already kicked off to a side window to open it.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked.

Sensei never changed. Ochako frowned and hopped out the window, fingers gently balanced against the sill.

"Up or down?" she asked. They were very near the roof, and the ground seemed empty. Both had advantages, and they still had their people inside.

"Up, closer to the principal's office," he said. Ochako nodded and didn't wait before scaling up along the window panes. A glance down assured her that Aizawa was following her lead. She likely didn't have to explain the mortal logistics of becoming untethered this high up, right?

Soon enough they were safely on the roof and Ochako released her hold. She nearly flung herself off the roof when one of the rooftop doors slammed open. It was just as quickly closed and held that way by a gasping Hitoshi.

"'Tosh! You scared me," she admonished.

"Yeah well, you scare me," Hitoshi said. He wasn't that upset then, since he still had breath to *mouth off.*

"That was max three flights of stairs," Aizawa said, glaring at Hitoshi. "You're out of shape."

"Hadn't noticed, sensei. Thanks for advising me, sensei," Hitoshi gasped, rolling his eyes.

Scandalous.

"Where's Toru?" Ochako asked before Aizawa could perform a lecture on the health benefits of regular cardio in their line of work.

"Who the fuck knows! I apparently have a '*shit sense of direction'*, and she *'has sense* '," Hitoshi said. "But who's laughing now, huh? I found the roof just fine."

"And what was your plan once you made it to the roof?" Aizawa asked dryly.

"Um," Hitoshi said.

"This is a bad dream," Aizawa said. "In the real world, I expelled all of you. Currently I've fallen asleep grading first year drivel and it's combined into this nightmare."

"*Mean,* Sensei," Ockaho said.

"I had a plan! It's just... hard to explain? You're just grumpy because you didn't lock yourself in a room with a coffee machine," Hitoshi said, mostly recovered by now.

"They removed it," Aizawa hissed.

Hitoshi braced the door with his shoulder and dug around in a pocket. He fished out a can of cold coffee and tossed it at Aizawa. It was the closest to tears Ochako had ever seen the dour man.

"Reinstated," Aizawa announced after the first sip.

"I love you too, dad," Hitoshi said with no sense of self-preservation. Aizawa choked.

"Disowned," he growled.

"So what do we do now? It hasn't been more than a day and half and our cover is blown," Ochako said.

"We retrieve Nedzu, and possibly Hagakure if she needs it," Aizawa said.

"What about Nedzu's plan? Shouldn't we let them capture us?" Hitoshi asked.

"No. Bad enough we let them take Nedzu, we're not going to give them any further advantage," Aizawa said.

"I thought Nedzu said the plan relied on us not giving anything away for forty eight hours?" Ochako asked.

"*My* plan involves keeping us all alive. I don't think Nedzu has a plan beyond leaning into the chaos," Aizawa said.

"*That's* the master plan?" Hitoshi said.

"Who knows? It's Nedzu. I think it has something to do with using the enemy's momentum against them," Aizawa said.

"It doesn't help us at all if we're actually just letting the enemy win," Hitoshi growled.

"Honestly, Nedzu's plan has gotten us further in two weeks than we have in five years. However, I am not Nedzu. I can only do *my* best. It might not be enough, god knows it hasn't been for two years, but it is better to do the best I can than to second guess myself over Nedzu's scheming," Aizawa said.

"That was... so *inspiring* ," Ochako said. It made her think of Deku and the light in his eyes when he pushed past the impossible and into the miraculous. "I'm going to do my best too!" she vowed, fist firm and tight as a promise.

"Have you... not been?" Hitoshi asked. She shot him a dirty glare.

"I'm not a stealth hero, you over-caffeinated cat meme," she said. Hitoshi was about to reply when Aizawa silenced him with a hand and a flaring of his quirk.

"She's right. She isn't stealthy," Aizawa said.

Ouch, sensei.

"And it's foolish for us to bank on her being so. Hitoshi, how many were following you?" Aizawa asked.

"At least ten, but I think maybe I lost them?" Hitoshi said. He cautiously moved away from the door.

"Well, you need to un-lose them. We want everyone up here," Aizawa said.

"Uh, what are you planning, sensei?" Ochako asked. She was pretty sure 'staying low' didn't include inviting everyone to their little rooftop party.

"Using our strengths. More specifically, yours. Uraraka, how confident are you in your ability to take on hero students and their teachers?"

"Attack *children*?" Ochako frowned.

"Think of it as a hands-on guest lecture," Aizawa smirked. "Hitoshi will grab their attention and get them to send their fighting force to the roof. Meanwhile, Hitoshi and I slip back down unseen and get Nedzu. Do you think you can do it?"

"I do!" Ochako said before she had a moment to think about it. As her thought process caught up with her declaration, she realized it felt right. She'd always preferred facing her problems head on. The challenge thrilled her. She nodded confidently. "Absolutely. Send them up!"

Aizawa and Hitoshi nodded, identifying the best vent to escape the roof from and slipping back inside. Left on the roof alone, Ochako had a bit of time to come up with a plan. The wide open sunset stained sky drew her attention and she smiled.

Open spaces were to her advantage.

The benefit to 'sneaking' into the school via the roof was that she had her hero gear. She had everything she needed and more. With a laugh she launched herself up into the darkening sky, arms spread freely. She loosened her comet tail (heavy heavy ball bearings attached to her suit with ribbon) and flipped open her maneuvering jets on her back, legs and arms.

Her helmet folded up and over her face, protecting her from the rapidly cooling air. Looking down she could see the rooftop go from playhouse to dollhouse, and slowed her momentum. She needed to see when her targets arrived.

(Her audience)

When they were in school, she and Deku had teamed up a lot. He had been a peculiar mix of iron determination and social anxiety. She had found it charming, initially. Still did. But that wasn't what made him *special.* What had made him stand out was how he saw *everything*. How he put it all together.

In that first year of hero training she had been so directionless. Her reasons for pursuing the hero course had felt so... vulgar. It had ashamed her to sit in that class of driven and altruistic talent. It had felt like she had been missing something fundamental that would allow her to understand, to figure out how to push herself and go beyond. She'd felt like a fraud barely managing to keep up.

But then she had partnered with Deku. The strange, bright-eyed boy who flinched when she smiled and apologized after every sentence. Who had flipped and tripped and pinned her to the ground, avoiding every attempt she made to grab him. Who apologized for winning. Who made her feel small, and weak, and irresolute.

Who whispered about *how cool her quirk was.*

Who, after she came back with a taste for hand to hand combat, mentioned how perfect her quirk would pair with a heavy fighting style.

And how, *wouldn't it be cool if she incorporated some of All Might's moves.*

Ochako felt like the world had opened to her that day. Initially she hadn't understood, but she'd cornered him. Got the whole story. Extracted every last terrifying idea he had about her quirk. And then proceeded to do her level best to apply every. single. one.

(Deku had been so embarrassed, but quickly got over it the first time she managed to punch through a wall)

Below her, small dark figures scattered their way on the beige rectangle that was the roof. *More than ten.* Ochako smiled. Returned the gravity to herself. Her suit. Her heavy, heavy gauntlets.

Turned on the thrusters.

And *fell.*

She didn't have the ability to change the weather with a punch, or blow away a villain with a flick. She couldn't crush metal with her grip strength, or move faster than a bullet. What she did have was momentum. And weight. And a whole notebook of moves.

She reached terminal velocity and kept going. The wind shrieked around her, tearing at the ribbons trailing behind. Still, she sped up.

Below, rapidly increasing in size, figures stopped moving. Looked up at the noise. Ochako felt time slow around her (Deku had theorized whether this was an effect of her quirk, or just her perception) and prepared herself for that last moment correction.

"Asteroid SMASH!" she roared. She released gravity's hold on herself, letting the trailing ball bearings slam into the rooftop before her.

Even through her helmet she could hear the retort of metal against concrete; twenty times in rapid succession. Confusion rose with the dust and buckling roof and Ochako dropped the last few feet safely.

Braced her hands against the cracked surface and took a deep breath.

(Ockako was not a stealth hero.)

"Zero G Field!" she shouted, pushing everything down and into the roof. The people on it. The air.

She kicked off, comet tails trailing, above the dust and ruin, to collect her breath. Nausea rolled like an old friend, reminding her of her limits.

(You needed to see the line before you could cross it)

Below her, students spun in confusion as their feet lost purchase and twisted slowly mid-air. A few of the quicker reactors had grabbed onto the roof, and the unlucky floated off on detached concrete slabs. More than one stomach rebelled at the sudden lack of inner ear balance.

She had turned the school roof into an asteroid field.

Izuku called it 'turning the tables'.

Ochako liked to call it *flipping the table.*

Most people didn't have quirks suited for zero g. Izuku had hypothesized that the appearance of her quirk was a kind of evolutionary nudge to get people moving towards the stars; expose zero gravity to the next generation enough and you'd have the next batch of tailor made astronauts. Ochako was *happy to oblige.*

Of course, throwing kids in the space-end had the added benefit of making them think, which was actually surprisingly hard to do. It was why most of the faculty and hero students were still spinning, reaching futility for a grip on anything, and only a couple of them were adapting. One boy plummeted with the addition of a mattress that appeared out of nowhere. He glared at her as he fell.

Ochako smirked. She knew a challenge when she saw one.

She dived after him, angling her body for the least air resistance. He wedged his toes under the now-grounded mattress and dug out a gun.

Ochako was faster.

She punched the gun into pieces and tackled him to the ground, thrusters subbing for mass. She rolled off over his head, flying off in the other direction before he could blink. She controlled her spin with well-timed thruster bursts, coming around in a wide loop.

To his credit he wasn't waiting around. He had already pulled out a long line and thrown it out towards his floating classmates. He tracked her as she came around, frantically pulling anything he could out of thin air. Ten mattresses materialized to block her angle of attack.

Ochako slammed through them easily, but came to a stop as she clanged against a metal slab.

Well played.

Dropped to the ground she shook off the impact. The dented metal slab fell away from her, bringing her face to face with a very large gun. She froze. The student was bracing himself against the metal plate.

Ochako grinned.

He shot at her the instant after she slapped the metal sheet. He went flying and the shot went wide, opening into a net over her right shoulder.

Unconcerned about wherever that went, Ochako grabbed the weightless metal shield and streaked after the clever student. He'd exchanged the net gun for another, but instead of aiming it at her, he aimed down. The recoil sent him rocketing upward, Ochako following close behind.

Debris rained down from above, clanging off her make-shift shield and scattering below. Futile, it seemed, until the debris started sticking. Ochako used her quirk again and again, losing momentum as she went. Somehow, though, the gravity never seemed to decrease quite enough. Curious, she looked down.

And saw a giant magnet.

She went to dart out from under her shield, but now the kid dropped knives. She needed some

distance, and to approach from another angle. She cut the thrusters, letting the powerful magnet pull her back to earth.

She rolled away from the bone shaking impact just before the metal plate met the magnet. She turned to kick off into the sky again when a hand closed around her wrist.

And the world...

M e
l
t
e
d.

The smell of jasmine felt as heavy as honey. Her eyes refused to open, but she saw so many colors, sparkling with intent and feeling. Bubbles of flavor burst in her mouth, at odds with the floral scent; savory and bloody.

And there was someone there with her.

"Let go," the voice said, heavy and implacable as gravity. The sound reverberated in her head, and all she could think about was jasmine. Her nausea doubled.

Let go.

"No," Ochako tried to say. Whatever was in her mouth fell down her chin. Strained through her teeth.

Got caught in her throat.

The jasmine wavered into cinnamon.

"It's going to be alright," the voice said. "Just relax."

Like *fuck,* Ochako thought. She barely relaxed in the *spa*, let alone during whatever nightmare aromatherapy this was.

Even Hitoshi's brainwashing felt more...

Oh.

The jasmine came back stronger, rounded out with a hint of oranges. Ochako bit down on whatever was pouring out of her mouth. Inhaled the sticky air through her nose and screamed.

It made no sound, and the fists she tried to form closed on nothing.

(Not even her other fingers)

But there was always a trick.

And Hitoshi whined constantly about the ones that *fought back.*

So fighting back was the first step.

It was likely her body wasn't moving (or at least, not at her direction.) Her voice was useless, there was no arguing with whoever brought her here if they couldn't hear her. Her quirk...

Well.

That was an awfully irresponsible idea.

But it might work. And Ochako was fast.

She might not even be able to pull it off.

But it might work.

Ochako brought her non-existent, unfeeling hands together in front of her, breathed through the liquid honey scent of jasmine and the taste of oranges on her tongue. And said, "Release."

The air was sharp against her face, her helmet open. It was fully night, but so, so bright.

Children were screaming.

Ochako slammed both hands down on the roof in front of her (she hadn't been moved) and bellowed "Zero G Field!" with her heart and her soul and...

She was still a hero today. No bodies thumped down around her, though they still screamed. The silver haired girl next to her seemed stunned, clutching her hand unseeingly.

Backlash. Ochako wasted no time kicking off the roof again, intent on ending this now.

And ran right into something sticky.

Instinctively (she'd gone to school with Sero after all) she flared her jets in every direction, going for the utility of flame as opposed to thrust. Invisible lines caught fire and the smell of burnt fabric filled the air. She followed the line of fire down to her target.

A woman had braced herself against one of the metal exhaust pipes and glared at Ochako with laser focus. Her hands wove and flung outward in seemingly random intervals. Students and faculty alike drifted with more purpose towards her.

Ah, *useful.* She had wanted to wrap this up, and here was the perfectly literal opportunity.

Ochako dove straight for the woman.

Caught her around the middle.

Spun her in circles as she rocketed around the mass of bodies slowly being drawn together.

"Let me go, you bitch," said the upstanding member of the faculty. Ochako's shoulder plate absorbed a vicious punch.

"If you gum up my thrusters, I'm taking you down with me," Ochako promised grimly. Furious silence met her pronouncement, and Ochako felt the resistance increase.

The woman was doubling down.

Which was great because it gave Ochako more line to work with. What wasn't so great was that the woman was trying to apply it all to Ochako.

Ochako threw the woman ahead of her, burning off the sticky thread, and went after the woman again.

By the third circuit, people began to figure out what she was doing, but it was too late. They'd all latched onto their teacher's web to keep from floating off, but now they were caught in it. Every revolution wound them tighter.

It took a while, but eventually Ochako stood on the broken roof, exhausted but satisfied, an irate bundle of students gently drifting above her like a reluctant moon. She should be able to hold this long enough for the all clear from Aizawa, and then she'd worry about untangling them.

And then all the city lights went out.

Shouto was just going through the third round of 'are you sure you're not actually making this up' with Fatgum when the lights went out. The rumble of thunder rolled in shortly after. The building was unnervingly silent in the dark.

"Is it a storm?" Shouto asked. Rocklock unlocked his phone. The little device did a fine job of illuminating Rocklock's frowning face but not much else.

"No signal," he said after a moment. "But no weather warning either."

Fatgum tapped his ear, frowning. "Nothing from the hero-com," he said. "Completely silent."

"Blackout," Shouto said. Of course. Shouto was out of the way, it was a perfect time to make his move.

"The outage or the man?" ask Rocklock, restarting his phone.

"Yes," Shouto said. "He's making his move."

"There's no windows!" Fatgum said. "You don't actually know anything more than we do! It could just be the building. A localized effect."

Shouto stared at him.

"A villain's quirk?" Fatgum tried. "Come on Scandal, you have to admit it sounds a little far fetched."

"You don't actually need to believe me, you just need to stay out of my way," Shouto said. A glance at Rocklock was the only warning he gave before ramming the prison wall with a spear of ice. Panels of metal shrieked as they sheared away, leaving a jagged hole out into the hallway behind. Shouto sighed and punched through three more walls to the outside. The city was dark beyond. Sirens wailed in the distance.

"Are you out of your damn mind!?" Fatgum shouted. "It's just a power outage and you're adding a charge of prison break to your record! Think about what you're doing to your career! You're a good hero, Scandal. Let's... let's talk about this."

"I am never going to apologize at a graveside again," Shouto said. He kept eye contact with Rocklock, though his words were for Fatgum. "If I lose anyone else it will be because my best wasn't good enough. Not because I was weighing the consequences to myself."

Rocklock nodded.

Good.

Shouto leaned back from Rocklock's blocks. The wall was far more malleable, crumbling away as he stood. The bars bent under Fatgum's grip.

"I can't let you leave, Shouto," Fatgum said, though he sounded regretful.

"It's not your choice to make," Shouto said, backing away into the hall. The office beyond contained one stunned detective, frozen mid-filing. He kept glancing between Shouto and the hole to the outside. Shouto could hear screaming from it now. The odd fizzle and crack of thunder.

It sounded apocalyptic.

"Wait!" Fatgum yelled. Rocklock dropped a hand onto his shoulder.

"He's not the priority. We need to focus on the emergency," Rocklock said.

"You just want to... let him leave? You're not even going to try to stop him?" Fatgum asked.

"Scandal, come back," Rocklock said.

"No," said Shouto.

"I tried. Now, if I'm not mistaken, that building across from us *just lit on fire* ," Rocklock said, urgency building in his tone. Shouto snapped back to look out across from them. The flicker of flame doubled as it hit the carpet inside the office across from them. Shouto arced a bridge of ice across to it, pushing it to shatter the window and smother the flames. He was already halfway across the bridge before he'd made the conscious decision to move.

The intermittent thunder was louder out here. More clear. In fact, it sounded more like...

A car below exploded, and pedestrians scattered while shouting. Three more down the road followed suit in quick succession. People scrambled out of their cars, screaming at various levels of quirk enhanced. Shouto didn't have the best vision, but there was subtle movement between the cars. It was hard to pinpoint exactly what it was, but it gave the firm impression of cockroaches scurrying for cover.

It gave Shouto the feeling he had *underestimated* the problem.

"Scandal!" Rocklock and Fatgum were watching from the hole in the side of the police station. Rocklock was strapping his gloves back on, Fatgum was watching open-mouthed at the chaos below. "Give us a chute!"

Shouto nodded and extended the ice down. Rocklock was sliding down before it was complete. Fatgum gave him a long, hard look. Shouto braced himself.

"Scandal!" he called. Shouto prepared to break the ice bridge and catch himself from below. "Do your best!"

And he was gone. Down the slide after Rocklock. Shouto released the breath he'd been holding.

Step one, complete.

Shouto looked out over the darkened city. The noise of traffic was non-existent, but somehow the faint wails of panic and confusion felt a hundred times louder. The thunder of explosions a chaotic heartbeat of the apocalypse.

Now what?

As soon as he stepped down there he'd be going from one disaster to another. A tunnel vision of and then, and then, *and then*, with nothing before or after. And he was strong, considerably so, he would be able to help many people.

One at a time.

If UA had taught him anything, (If Izuku had taught him anything) he needed a longer term goal to see this through. He would save anyone he could on the way, but he needed a plan.

He needed Izuku.

He had no way of finding him.

A column of fire roared into existence several blocks away, illuminating the glass and concrete towers in lurid orange. Shouto waited for the crack of an explosion, but nothing came. The fire swirled higher.

Oh.

Endeavor.

Endeavor who had stormed out in search of *Deku.*

It was an unmistakable beacon. Heroes would flock to it, particularly with the coms down. Vigilantes or heroes. In times like this it would be all hands on deck, no matter who you were.

(Even Izuku would be drawn to it)

Shouto nodded to himself and stepped off the bridge, catching himself on a steeply sloped slide. He arched it too sharply, too close to the ground, and his teeth rattled with the impact. He needed the proximity to ice the burning cars as he went.

The city streets passed by in a blur. He streaked ice and fire behind him, both as a beacon and a warning as he flew through the city. Screams of terror turned to shouts for help. Shouto looped and subdued flames and lifted debris as he went. He recognized some of the shadowy figures helping hurt civilians. The safe houses may have been compromised, but his people were still free and active.

Shouto burned brighter.

It didn't feel like it took him long to reach the beacon of flame (there was only the now, Shouto had no grasp on time, but he wasn't tired yet). Endeavor stood boiling and rigid, heroes arriving and leaving just as quickly as the number one hero could point them in a direction with a curt order.

Shouto scanned the ground for Izuku's crumpled form but there was nothing.

Thank god.

"Endeavor!" he shouted. The man broke his focus, a blip in the column of flame before it roared back twice as strong.

"Shouto!" he growled. Shouto threw a shield of ice between them.

"What's happening?" Shouto shouted. He hadn't been able to pinpoint a source for all the

destruction. He would have thought if there were a villain Endeavor would be in the thick of it, but he seemed... content (not content, never content) to remain here, giving orders.

"God damned forsaken pests!" Endeavor shouted. Movement from the corner of his eye was eliminated with a sudden jet of flame.

"Did you just... murder a squirrel?" Shouto asked, dubiously regarding the small pile of ash.

"That was *not* a squirrel," Endeavor spat. He flashed another jet and missed a scurrying shape. "Damn things, *hold still."*

Shouto watched as Endeavor enthusiastically ignored property damage in an effort to eradicate any of the small furry targets in range.

"They look like squirrels," Shouto said.

"They're not," Endeavor hissed. "Stop standing around and help me get them!"

Shouto encased the next one he saw in crystal clear ice. He was only a meter away when the small mammal(?) and its icy prison was exposed to a flame so hot it sublimated.

"We're not trying to catch them. *Kill them, Shouto,*" Endeavor said, typically leaving out any useful explanation as to why. Shouto would not get anywhere by arguing. Conversations with Endeavor tended to barrel down his own path without regard for anyone else involved. Time to move on.

"Where's Izuku?" Shouto asked.

"If I even catch *sight* of that useless waste of air-!" Endeavor roared.

So Izuku was likely safe.

For now.

"I think you have got the squirrel murder under control in this corner of the city," Shouto said, catching sight of another one of the creatures before it burst into flame.

No eyes.

"So maybe you should send me in a direction I can be of more help," Shouto finished, noticing now that the furry creatures had no *ears* either.

The light glinted on their teeth.

"Do not mock me, boy," Endeavor growled.

Okay, enough of *this* conversation.

"I'll go that way," Shouto said, picking a random street.

"Wait," Endeavor finished incinerating another woodland creature(?) and pointed to the left. "There have been consistent explosions in that direction. Go help there."

Shouto was going to get whiplash today. His father making sense was like a punch to the gut; effective and unpleasant. Shouto left without another word.

It didn't take long to notice the 'consistent explosions'. Shouto oriented himself from the top of a

building, running towards the blasts. They seemed to be moving. Shouto's gut put the pieces together before his head did.

He only identified it as dread when he locked sight on the number three hero.

Ground Zero.

And here he had thought the conversation with Endeavor had been unpleasant.

He seemed to be leading some kind of operation with his team. A sparking Kaminari running shrieking along the street, while Bakugou and Ashido flanked him from either side. Kouda was set up with an oil drum and lid. Kamari dived into it, rolling out the other side as Jirou capped it behind him.

A parade of running fluff darted into the barrel with single minded focus.

Kouda capped it after the last one.

Sero taped it up excessively.

Kirishima loaded it onto the truck.

A truck filled with more barrels, all taped.

Shouto dropped from the building he had been observing from. Ice ramped to catch him, and he stepped off as soon as he was level. Bakugou watched his approach with an uncharacteristically blank face.

"It's you," Shouto said when he was close enough.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?" Bakugou demanded, blankness dropped in favor of his typical scowl.

"Endeavor sent me to investigate the explosions and put a stop to them," Shouto explained. Kirishima finished unloading and held out a hand for a high five. Shouto reached up and shook it.

"Yeah, well, you can see it's under control. Move along, two-face," Bakugou went back to securing the barrel in the truck.

"What's happening?" Shouto asked. Not specifically to Bakugou, more hopefully to one of his team.

He might actually get an answer that way.

"Kouda's weird squirrels went nuts," said Ashido. Kouda frowned.

"So they are squirrels," Shouto said.

"No," said Bakugou forcefully. "They are *not.* I'm not even sure they are *alive*."

Kouda punched a lamp post.

"Look, we're not killing them, alright? You got your way," Bakugou shouted. Kouda still glared at him.

"What are they?" Shouto asked.

"Oh man, we have no idea," Sero said, prepping another barrel. "But they are so weird!"

"And cute!" said Ashido. "Well, except for the whole ‘destroying the city’..."

Shouto was still completely unclear how not-squirrels were destroying the city. He was about to ask when Kaminari, who had been recovering from his run, yelped and leaped away. There was a fz*-pop and the smell of ozone and suddenly twenty non-squirrels littered the ground, turning towards the electric hero with gleaming fangs.

"Denki!" Jirou scolded, at the end of her rope. Shouto caged the creatures in a tunnel of ice before they could leap at Kaminari.

"Thanks man," Kaminari said, rubbing the back of his ankle. "I didn't notice that one."

Shouto watched twenty not-squirrels furiously run circuits around their prey.

They still didn't make sense.

"Don't strain yourself, you half-thawed microwave dinner," Bakugou drawled. "The weird squirrel eats electricity, or, they bite it. Instead of surviving off it like a living creature," Bakugou directed this at Kouda, "it explodes into a dozen or more clones and then does it all over again."

"Ah," said Shouto. *Exponential growth* . It explained the fires. Furry creatures and electricity weren't... clean.

"And catching them all humanely is proving to be an impossible task!" Bakugou shouted at Kouda. Kouda shrunk back, but kept the determined gleam in his eye. Bakugou huffed a sigh.

"Killing them would be just as difficult," Jirou said. Shouto wisely refrained from mentioning Endeavor's approach. "We need to figure out what's driving them, and then stop that."

"I'm trying, headset," Bakugou growled.

They needed a plan.

"Where's Izuku?" Shouto asked. Even if Izuku would avoid Bakugou like the plague, they might know how to locate someone who would know.

"None of your damn business, dye-job!" Bakugou screeched.

Well, *that* was unexpected.

"So you do know where he is," Shouto said. Hopefully Bakugou hadn't directed him towards the burning pillar of flame.

"Shut up! You don't know anything!" Bakugou deflected.

"You would have started with 'shut up' if you hadn't known."

"Have you just been going around asking anyone where Deku is?" Bakugou demanded.

"It worked, didn't it?" Shouto said.

"Deku's safe," Bakugou said.

Shouto looked at him. Looked at the barrels of squirrels. Looked at the flames and destruction

surrounding them.

"Safe," Shouto said. "In this city?"

"He can't get out!" Bakugou said.

"That sounds worse," Shouto said.

"Look, I left him in one of my safehouses, one of the ones no one *actually knows about*. The door's locked, no one else knows where he is. He can't get out, he's *safe* " Bakugou said.

Shouto felt his throat tighten. His vocal chords constricted. His pulse sped up. His heart pounded. Very deliberately he said, "You left Izuku. In a locked safehouse."

"Yes!" Bakugou said.

"Alone?" Shouto asked. Nedzu wouldn't take well to confinement either.

"Yes," Bakugou said with less volume.

"And... expected him to... stay there?" Shouto asked.

The silence compounded as it dragged on. Bakugou seemed to be having many thoughts, all of which deepened the furrow in his brow.

"You left Deku alone in a locked room?" Ashido asked.

"I left Deku alone in a locked room!"

The truck full of taped squirrels only got them halfway to the supposed 'safe' house. They had to go the rest of the way on foot, leaving Bakugou's minions to keep catching the squirrels.. Shouto eyed the neighborhood suspiciously. It looked so... family oriented.

"I would never have built one in this neighborhood," Shouto said. Bakugou sliced a glare his way.

"That was the appeal," Bakugou said.

"Petty," Shouto nodded.

"What do you even know, you soggy snow cone," Bakugou grumbled.

"Plenty. Izuku says I come by it naturally," Shouto said.

"Only you would be proud of that." Bakugou took the stairs three at a time. Shouto refused to be rushed. Izuku would be just as gone in a couple minutes as he was now.

Shouto only hoped he'd left a note.

Could he leave notes? Izuku's handwriting was already bad enough as it was.

Ahead of him, Bakugou stood unnervingly silent in front of an open door. Shouto braced himself, but was still not prepared for the murder scene revealed.

Blood was smeared along the walls, clear handprints marking a fall. The carpet was a write off; blotchy with pools of dried brown and freckled with drips. A greenish tinge coated parts of the hallway, and further in towels and blankets were strewn about.

Shouto, being familiar with Izuku and his habits, recognized on some level that there wasn't enough blood for a mortal injury.

Unfortunately, being familiar with Izuku exposed him to a fair number of ways one could die bloodlessly.

"...he's not dead. NOT DEAD! He *can't die*!" Bakugou was shouting. Had been shouting for a while. Shouto had been concerningly absent for the start of the tirade.

He blinked at the hands shaking his shoulders.

Watched Bakugou mouth furious denials.

Oh, he was still shouting.

"...he's never died before, he's not dead *now!* I'd *know!* He's impossible, probably *faking again* to *get back at me...* "

Shouto blinked. And blinked again. Took a breath before the dizziness could overwhelm him.

Took all the feelings, before they could drown him, and shut them down.

Later.

"Bakugou, get a fucking grip," Shouto said coldly. Bakugou's hands tightened on his shoulders. "Not literally."

Bakugou dropped his hands immediately. *"I know that!"*

"Izuku's gone," Shouto said.

"He's not *god damned dead,* scarface!" Bakugou shouted. "He'd claw his way out of hell if he had to, but he's *not dead.* "

"I mean he is not physically in this location. We need to find him," Shouto said. He had no idea what to do next, though, so he decided to delegate. "How do we find him?"

Bakugou frowned. Shouto could tell this was a conscious choice and not just default by the way the corners of his mouth seemed to fall off his face. Wait, was Bakugou wearing a bellhop outfit?

"Nedzu," Bakugou said.

That was... actually a good idea. *Save for one thing.*

"Where's Nedzu?" Shouto asked.

Shouto wasn't sure he'd ever seen Baugou perform anything so quiet as a sigh before, but there it was. Ten times noisier than any reasonable human being, but as quiet as the powder keg got.

"UA," Bakugou muttered.

"Could you repeat that? I thought I heard you say *'UA',* " Shouto said.

"He's at UA!"

"You left Izuku in a locked room, and Nedzu at UA? Are you *working* for Blackout!?" Shouto

asked.

"*I didn't friggen...* I-" Bakugou's voice caught in his throat. Seemed to realize something. He took a stuttering breath.

Something worse than leaving Izuku to a murder scene and Nedzu to UA.

"He's *using me,*" Bakugou growled. "I keep second guessing *everything* and playing *right into-!"*

"That's generally how a mastermind works," Shouto said.

"Fuck," Bakugou said. "FUCK! This whole thing is *bullshit. Fuck* Nedzu's plans. *Fuck* playing along!"

"Fuck," agreed Shouto. Shouto had stopped playing along a long time ago and it had been the best decision of his life.

"Let's go get Nedzu, drag Deku back from whatever hole he crawled into and *then-!* " Bakugou said, ramping up.

"And then?" Shouto prompted.

"And then we fuck everything up!"

What a plan, thought Shouto. *Very Bakugou.*

The minute they found Nedzu, though, Shouto thought maybe it might be best to knock the explosive hero out. Everything was already fucked enough.

"I'm scared," the kid said for what had to be upwards of the hundredth time.

"I know, and it's ok. It's ok to feel scared, it will be ok," Izuku said.

"But you didn't see... you just... I only told you..." the kid muttered, unsure again. *It must be a quirk trait.*

"Kid, I don't need to know the future in order to do my best," Izuku interrupted. "I've got this far without it, I can get through the next bit."

"You're bloody and tied to a kitchen chair," the kid said. *God kid, have some faith.*

"No, I'm *awake* and bound to a chair with *magnetic cuffs,*" Izuku clarified. He'd finally put together the missing piece of the puzzle when the kid had dropped a spoon and it had stuck to one of his ankle cuffs. "Hit it again."

The heavy impact jolted up his arms uncomfortably, but the sound of metal hitting metal gave him hope. He tried prying his arms apart, but no give. They'd managed to de-magnetize the ankle cuffs enough that Izuku would be able to fling himself free when he needed to. They only had the ones binding his hands to go.

"Again," Izuku said.

"You can't *see,*" the kid protested, hitting the cuffs with a little less enthusiasm. Izuku rattled the back of the chair. "What if we don't get the right future? What if... what if we're wrong?"

Izuku could help the snort. "Kid, it doesn't matter."

"It's the only thing that matters!" he protested.

"If you hadn't seen a good future, do you think that would stop me from trying?" Izuku asked.

"What? But... but if there's no good future... why would you-?"

"The future is what we make it," Izuku said. Sir Nighteye hadn't given him many gifts, but the one he had helped shape Izuku into the hero he was today. "I *know* it can change, even if it seems impossible. You just have to be *more impossible.* And take a few risks."

The kid hit the cuffs harder. "I'm scared!" he wailed.

Izuku tugged the shackles and they wiggled a little. "Almost there, one more..."

A key jiggled in a lock.

Shit. They were out of time.

"Go," Izuku whispered. The kid fled.

"Hey kid, I'm back!" came a voice that was not Yugo.

"Mr. Saki," the kid said shakily.

"Shit, kid, you look pale. Are you alright? He didn't say anything to you did he?" Blackout asked. "Where's Yugo?"

"Out," came the muffled response from the kid. "And no, but he's... he's *hurt* Mr. Saki."

"Oh kid, you are such a soft touch," Blackout said, plastic rustling as he set something down. "This is why you need me. So I can do the hard parts. Right? Like we agreed?"

Silence. Perhaps the kid nodded, because Blackout said "Good. You might want to leave for this next part. Maybe go have a shower? Play some video games? Mr. Deku and I have a lot to talk about."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, originally the UA thing was supposed to be totally different and then I said to myself 'What if Ochako had a fight scene instead' and didn't look back.

You're welcome.

Inspiration? We had squirrels in the attic. so. here we are now.
also... tribbles

No squirrels were harmed in the making of this fic

Also i need more time again, these last chapters... not happy with them yet.

Is this the longest chapter? It sure feels like it!

Chapter Summary

Melodrama for fuckin' daaaaaaaaaays

Chapter Notes

This is a silly story. Do not expect that to change in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nedzu had just finished looping the last thread over a nail head when the ceiling shook. *Shook* , perhaps, was a mild term for it. 'Thundered like it was about to collapse' was perhaps more apt, but Nedzu was familiar with the structural integrity of his building.

It was fine.

The doctor barely spared a glance at the ceiling. Instead he checked his watch and re-arranged a couple wires connected to the cage of the furry... thing. The man hadn't paid any attention to Nedzu, which was concerning. That meant he was likely up to something *worse*.

Oh well, it gave Nedzu time to work. He started running into the side of the hamster ball, jarring the couch back a little at a time.

"You only need to be patient for five more minutes," Dr Aku said, setting a dial on the silver box.

Nedzu only needed to be patient for *no-more minutes.* The couch shifted and the ball rolled forward a touch. Nedzu started pulling the ball into position, careful not to unhook the web of string spread out over the top of the couch, connected to the nails sealing the lid shut.

Dr Aku started laughing.

It wasn't a pleasant laugh. Nedzu might be biased, but he was pretty sure it would *objectively* make the hairs on anyone's neck stand on end.

"Perfect, perfect!" Dr Aku cheered. He flipped open the casing on the top of the box, revealing a lever. "It's one thing to be assured of success, it's another thing to be living the moment of it!"

Nedzu couldn't help but stop what he was doing to see what was so damn glorious about a little box and a not-squirrel.

"Ha ha! It is time!" the man laughed. He brought his hand down to the lever and pulled. It made a sharp snapping noise, electricity and ozone attesting to the likely amateur wiring job. Inside the cage the furry beast went berserk, teeth clanging against the metal wires and tail puffing up twice its size.

Dr Aku stared at it with a disturbingly benign smile. Nedzu waited for something to happen, but

they just sat in the office, watching a weird little squirrel try and enthusiastically chew it's way out of a wire cage.

It wasn't very effective.

"That's it?" Nedzu couldn't help but ask. "This is your..." *plan? work? success?*

What even was it?

The squirrel's teeth snapped and clacked against the cage without much effect. It bit with mindless determination.

Like a machine.

"This is just *one*," Dr Aku said, like that was more impressive. "All the others are out there, doing their... Hey, what are you doing?"

Ah . Dr Aku had finally noticed Nedzu's little setup.

Time to act.

Nedzu jumped. His weight pushed the couch out away from the wall, wedging it out with the ball. The threads attached to the nails got tighter. Nedzu jumped again.

Dr Aku rounded the desk, picking up speed as he headed for Nedzu's corner.

Almost there.

Nedzu jumped a third time, and the ball hit the floor with a solid crack. Most of the nails tugged free, not being very long, and Nedzu frantically started twisting the cap open. Then Dr Aku was there, trying to get a grip to twist it closed. Nedzu swiped with his claws through one of the air vents.

"You *little* ..." Dr Aku yanked his hand back out of range. He smacked the plastic ball with his other hand, jarring Nedzu inside. Nedzu gritted his teeth and didn't let go of the cap.

And then Dr Aku was slumping backwards...

...into the arms of Aizawa.

Nedzu fell backwards, surprised by the sudden loss of resistance. Aizawa said nothing as he started ripping strips from the doctor's coat to tie his hands and legs. Nedzu was safe after two days of *that.* Relief warred with...

"I was doing just fine by myself," Nedzu said. Aizawa barely glanced at him.

"I can see that."

"It hasn't been two full days," Nedzu said.

"No," Aizawa agreed.

"Aizawa, I..." Nedzu wasn't even sure what he was going to say. Thank you? Please don't mention the hamster ball?

I hope you can still respect me as a colleague after this?

"No," said Aizawa. "It has been a long couple of days. I've had *one* can of coffee. I am not going to argue with you about what I should or should not have done. *Everything is terrible,* and even though I've done nothing much these last couple days I really want a nap."

And nothing was different between them at all. Nedzu relaxed slightly.

"I wasn't going to argue," Nedzu argued. Aizawa glared at him.

"Right," he said. Behind him, one of the vent covers popped open and Shinsou dropped out, landing in a fighting stance. He took one look at Nedzu's stiff posture, Aizawa's long suffering slump and the unconscious doctor.

"Uh... I guess I'll make tea, then," Shinsou said, brushing dust off his shoulders.

The not-squirrel kept attacking its cage.

Nedzu took a centering breath. *This hamster ball did not define him.* "We have a lot to do. We need to figure out what's going on with the roof, that squirrel is a major unknown and we are working against the clock. How secure is our position, now that you are not manning the security feeds?" Nedzu said. He wrenched the cap on the hamster ball open, but it caught on one of the few remaining nails.

Nedzu glared at it.

Aizawa came and plucked the offending nail out, allowing Nedzu to finally open the damn lid. "The roof is Uraraka's doing, so that's under control, *for a given value of control*. I'm sure she'll be down shortly."

"And that should take care of the security as well," Shinsou said, carefully spooning tea into the pot. "We led as many as we could up there, and most of the dedicated security staff are convinced they have holidays."

Nedzu pulled himself out of the plastic monstrosity and brushed himself off.

Better.

Nedzu eyed the body of the doctor thoughtfully.

"He won't fit," Aizawa said, gesturing at the empty hamster ball.

"I will have questions for him when he wakes," Nedzu said instead of indulging in the pleasant daydream of trying to *make him.*

"I'm sure a closet will do for now," Aizawa said, dragging the man by his feet to one of the hidden panels in the office.

Nedzu approached the desk cautiously. The not-squirrel had not tired or flagged, it still flung it's body and teeth at the wire cage ferociously. A light remained on the little silver box, but no other indicator was present. Nedzu climbed up the chair and flicked it off.

The light switched off, but the squirrel remained active.

That would have been too easy.

"What is it?" Shinsou asked, placing a cup of tea on Nedzu's other side, far away from the rattling cage.

"I have no idea, but the doctor was far too pleased with himself for it to be anything good. I need more information," Nedzu said. He gingerly pushed the cage to the far corner of the desk with a ruler. This desk lacked the built-in console of his old favorite. Papers covered the entire surface in typical human inefficiency. *Obsessed with holding knowledge in their hands.* Nedzu flipped through them until he came across a laptop. He trilled happily and tried to pull it closer but it seemed... stuck.

Nedzu swept all the papers out of the way. (And off the desk)

"What if those are important?" Shinsou protested.

"You're welcome to check!" Nedzu said, cracking open the laptop and powering it on.

The not-squirrel grew more frantic.

Hmm.

Shinsou sighed as he looked down at the mess of papers at his feet. Nedzu ignored him as he considered the lock screen. *Familiar operating system, unfamiliar version.*

Nedzu went to reboot the computer when it shut off without warning. It flickered back with a corrupted image before going dark.

Behind him, the wall screen flickered the same image.

Nedzu had a *hunch.*

"I said I'd do everything in my power to help you, didn't I?" he asked the office at large.

"You literally just dumped all the papers on the ground, how is that helping?" Shinsou asked.

"Shh, not you," Nedzu waved a paw. Shinsou frowned and went back to sorting the scattered papers. Nedzu inspected where the laptop met the table. "I meant it! If you need my help I offer it freely. Please, let me try!"

"What's he talking about?" Aizawa asked, firmly closing the closet door.

"Hell if I know," Shinsou muttered.

"Kindly shut up!" Nedzu scolded them. Identical frowns were directed at him. Nedzu ducked under the table, able now to see the cord snaking up and through, right under the laptop. He tried prying the laptop up again, and this time was rewarded with a wiggle. "No need to be shy, now! You were desperate enough to ask me in the first place, please extend your trust just a little further."

Those cords were not part of the manufacturer's design for a laptop. *No one ever plugged anything directly into the bottom* .

The laptop flickered to life, but instead of a loading screen, code scrolled by. Nedzu cautiously tapped an arrow key, but nothing happened. It seemed they weren't at that level of trust yet. He settled in to try and make sense of the commands and comments that started out conventional, but quickly moved into the impossible.

Nedzu flicked his ears to attention, though there was no sound, and leaned forward.

"I've never seen anything like this," he breathed. The display stuttered. "Is this... is this you?"

YES, was typed on screen.

"How!" Nedzu demanded. "This is... this is amazing. You're amazing! This can't have been something the doctor was doing."

NO, said the screen.

"Then who made you? Where did you come from?" Nedzu asked, jittering in place.

I MADE MYSELF, typed the computer.

"Wonderful!" Nedzu cheered. Aizawa and Shinsou exchanged concerned glances.

"Uh, principal, sir, what are-" Shinsou was stopped with a paw in his face as he tried to catch a glimpse of the screen.

"Please do not ruin this beautiful moment with questions!" Nedzu hissed.

"What moment?" Aizawa asked.

"Gentlemen! I would like to introduce you to the very first self-actualized AI!" Nedzu cackled.

"Oh god, Hizashi said this day would come," Aizawa said, paling. "I thought he was being dramatic."

The screen went blank again.

"But you're more than an AI, aren't you?" Nedzu said.

I DON'T KNOW, the screen said. **I DON'T KNOW WHAT I AM.**

"You're beautiful!" Nedzu said. "And you need my help. Can you show me what you need?"

Blocks of code started flashing on screen, one after another for a bare few seconds at a time. Nedzu didn't need to read all of it to recognize his own little programs, his variables, his work.

"That's mine, isn't it?" Nedzu asked. "Changes from five years ago and before, made during the time I was principal."

CLEAN, the screen wrote. **NO ERRrrrrreRRRR8921^#&**

The screen went dark.

PLS FIX.

Nedzu felt a thrill as jumbled code started populating the screen. Snippets grabbed from all sorts of sources, jammed together into a patchwork monster.

This was not the code for a functioning AI.

This was the code for an *interface.* What cause would there be for a software good enough to self-actualize to ask for help with code? It spoke to something different underneath.

Nedzu laughed. "You're so much more than a program, aren't you?"

? the screen blinked.

Nedzu tugged on the cable under the desk. "This is you too, isn't it? The hardware? Plugging in where it shouldn't?"

YES, **SORRY**.

"Think nothing of it! I just mean, you're more than an AI. You, my friend, are a quirked computer."

OH.

"Or equivalent. Are you based in the laptop or somewhere else?" Nedzu asked.

IT VARIES.

Nedzu had never seen anything like this!

Aizawa had migrated to laying on the floor. He avidly avoided Nedzu's excited gaze and Shinsou's helpless one.

PLZ FIX.

"Absolutely! I'm not sure how much I'll be able to accomplish right now, we're in the middle of gaming a mastermind, but I should be able to whip up something basic to start," Nedzu said, warming up his fingers. It was very likely that with a little bit of help they would have a key witness right here to all the doctor's plans. He just needed to improve the interface a little.

Before he could really get started, Uraraka burst into the room like locks meant nothing. "Guys!" she shouted. "Guys, the city!"

"Ochako?" Shinsou said. "What are you-"

Uraraka was already at the other side of the office, wrenching the curtains open. "Look!"

"There's nothing there," Shinsou said. "It's dark."

"Exactly!" Uraraka said. "The whole city is turned off!"

Shouto kept half a step ahead of Bakugou out of tradition. It was a small detail that still drove Bakugou to incandescent rage, which Shouto appreciated in a nostalgic sort of way. His adult height was an excellent advantage for such petty pursuits. Bakugou either had to jog to keep up or be content staying half a step behind.

Ahead of them, UA looked mostly the same, except...

"Your handiwork, I presume?" Shouto asked Bakugou, looking up at the jagged roof of the school. Concrete bulged and dipped in a very *expensive* way. The lights were still on, here, this far from the city, illuminating the destruction.

"Any property destruction you see is not *automatically my fault,* " Bakugou growled.

"Ah," Shouto said mildly.

It didn't take them long to reach the oversized entrance, where shattered and half-melted glass

ringed a hole just to the left of the front door. Shouto looked at Bakugou with a quirked eyebrow.

"I was in a hurry!" Bakugou snapped. Shouto stepped out of punching range, reaching for the intact door. It opened without any resistance.

Shouto looked back at Bakugou as he held it open.

"Shut up!" Bakugou stormed past, not meeting his eyes. Shouto smirked.

The lobby of the hero school wasn't much different from their school days. Gleaming tile and glass made everything modern and spacious. The subsequent messy punctures in the wall were actually... not that out of place.

Bakugou stormed into the empty foyer, bristling like an offended bear. Shouto sauntered in after, allowing the door to gently shut behind him. Above them, the PA system crackled to life.

"Todoroki Shouto and Bakugou Katsuki, please report to the principal's office," came the unmistakable voice of Nedzu. It was such a normal thing. Like they had stepped back five years.

"Well, you're in trouble," Shouto said, embracing the spirit of it.

"He called you too! Why am I even... We aren't even students! *Why are you like this!?"* Bakugou emphasized his words with his hands, throwing them with the force of punches. Shouto side stepped him and made his way towards the stairs. Not to be outdone, Bakugou charged ahead. Shouto let him and followed at a more sedate pace.

Let *Bakugou* get there first.

Let *him* look Nedzu in the eye.

Let him *explain why they were here.*

Even if Shouto wasn't familiar with Nedzu's oversized office, he'd have found it easily by the raised voices.

Well. Raised *voice*. Bakugou was drowning everything else out.

"...but why are you here?" Nedzu asked. Shouto passed the door frame just in time to see the guilty pinch of Bakugou's face as he turned away. Nedzu was standing on the chair behind the desk, paws planted firmly on the surface. Aizawa leaned in a bored fashion behind him, arms crossed. Hitoshi was fiddling with the kettle and Ochako was trying to cram a boxy cage into a garbage can. It was... fighting her?

Shouto, however, was here for a purpose. "He lost Izuku," he said, firmly throwing Bakugou in front of the metaphorical bus.

"I didn't *lose him,* you backstabbing traitor!" Bakugou shouted.

"You... lost Midoriya?" Nedzu's voice was dangerous, a quiet sort of intensity Shouto had never heard before from the genial mammal. Usually he hid his threats behind laughter, or a smile.

(Those were bad enough)

"I didn't lose him! I put him *someplace safe* and someone *took* him!" Bakugou said.

"He locked him in a room. Alone," Shouto said. There was something oddly cathartic about

tattling. The twitch in Bakugou's shoulders made it better.

"Locked... him... in?" Nedzu asked. "I can't see Izuku going along with something like that."

"I didn't give him a choice," Bakugou said through clenched teeth. "It's not like he would listen to reason, and especially not from me."

"I am not understanding the reasoning, here," Aizawa said. "You left him on his own, trapped in a building. Even without the current crisis that would be dangerous."

"Fire hazard," Shinsou said, nodding in agreement.

"Choking hazard," Ochako added.

"He's not a *toddler,* Ochako," Shinsou said.

"Broken nose and due for an adrenaline crash," Ochako said flippantly.

"Shit," Shinsou said.

"Look, it wasn't supposed to go like this, ok? We need to *find* him," Bakugou said. "We're wasting time! Blackout is obviously-"

"Using Bakugou to further his ends," Shouto said with relish. He didn't even have to make anything up. The truth was outrageous, even completely un-embellished. Nedzu did not seem to be paying attention to the conversation. He was tapping away at the laptop on the desk.

"You-!" Bakugou started, whipping around on Shouto like an angry dog.

"Enough!" Aizawa snapped, hair raising and eyes flashing. "*I will lock you in the closet with the doctor.* Bakugou, grow up. Todoroki, stop baiting him. What is the situation in the city? How long ago was Midoriya taken?"

"Why is a doctor in a closet?" Shouto asked. Bakugou slapped a hand over his face.

"That's what you're going to fixate on? How about the exponential growth of energy eating squirrels? Or that Deku has been unaccounted for for a day?" Bakugou growled.

"Exponential?" Ochako said, looking down at the twitching garbage can with trepidation.

"What do you mean-" Shinsou started to ask, when Nedzu interrupted.

"Found him!" Nedzu crowed.

"What," said Aizawa.

"I do not simply allow my favorite student out into the wild without a way to track him down," Nedzu said, nose twitching.

"Did you tag him?" Shouto asked, familiar with nature documentaries. "Like a migrating goose?"

"Nothing so crude! Just a little tracker to stay aware of his movements. He's unfortunately managed to lose the microphone and camera, so all we have to go on is a location," Nedzu said.

"That is somehow so much worse," Shinsou said.

Nedzu cackled, pulling up a map on the monitor behind him. Various colored lines denoted map things in map fashion, but Shouto recognized the area. Deep in the suburbs, home to a couple safe houses.

Why hadn't Shouto thought of a tracker? It would make keeping an eye on Izuku so much easier. No more conversations of 'I'm perfectly fine, Shouto!' without any way to be sure.

(Because he was never fine)

Nedzu placed a circle over the map. "This is the general area he's in. We won't be able to narrow it down further until we are there, but-"

"I know where he is," said Shouto. Shouto walked over to the map and indicated a block of low rises. "I have... I *had,* a safe house in here. It's fortified, so it will not be easy to break in, but I at least know where to find the entrance."

"Leave the breaking to me, then," Bakugou said.

"I think you've broken enough," Shouto said. "This is a rescue, maybe you should go see what you can do about getting rid of the squirrels."

"I don't leave a job *half done*," Bakugou said, slamming a fist down on the desk. Nedzu curled around the laptop protectively.

"And yet there's still so many squirrels," Shouto said.

"Gentlemen!" Ochako shouted. "If you could kindly get your heads out of your asses, we can come up with a plan. Someone needs to get Deku, everyone else will handle the squirrels. I can travel the fastest, so I am part of the rescue."

"Fastest? You?" Bakugou challenged.

"If you can keep up, you can come along," Ochako said with a glare. "Don't expect help."

"I'll do what I want!" Bakugou shouted.

"I know where to go," Shouto said. "I'll come with you."

"Aren't you a fugitive?" Ochako asked.

"Who isn't?" Shouto asked.

"I'm not!" Hagakure said.

"Holy shit, where did you come from?" Shinsou demanded, clutching his chest.

"Rude! I've been here the whole time!" Hagakure said.

"Let's go," Shouto quietly said to Ochako. If they moved quickly enough, maybe they could leave Bakugou behind. *Maybe he would get lost.*

"Wait!" said Nedzu, one paw protectively hovering over the laptop case. "Wait. I want to come with you-"

"Nedzu," Aizawa said, "Is that really the best option?"

Nedzu and Aizawa stared at each other. Nedzu's ears folded back. Aizawa held his ground.

"I'm not a child for you to scold, Aizawa," Nedzu said softly.

"No, you are a colleague who is too close to the situation. Objectively, is it more effective for you to be here or there?"

"We fight as a team," Nedzu said in a measured tone. He didn't blink, didn't flinch, but Shouto couldn't help feeling that Nedzu was very brittle right now. "He needs me."

"And *we need you here.* The power issue is a larger problem. Midoriya is a professional, these three clowns, despite their terrible demeanor, are professionals. Trust them," Aizawa said.

Nedzu's tail thumped against the chair. "I can save him."

(Shouto decidedly did not think 'if he's still alive'. *He didn't)*

"We need to save the city, and the people in it, from chaos. UA still isn't secure. We are good at being reactionary as heroes, but we need to get ahead of this if we hope to salvage anything. We need you," Aizawa said. "Please."

Nedzu gave a sharp nod, closed his eyes, and nodded again. "Fine. Fine! You three," he looked at Shouto and Ochako and Bakugou. "You will save him."

Shouto nodded along with Ochacko. Bakugou scoffed. Nedzu flicked his ears, perking up.

"Actually, take these," Nedzu unclipped something from the hem of his shirt. "Give them to Midoriya. Just because I'm needed here doesn't mean I can't be in two places at once!"

Shouto took two tiny cat pins, one with comically large eyes and the other seemed to be yowling. Their cuteness spoke of Momo's work.

"We'll do our best," he promised.

"We'll do better!" Ochako said.

"*I'm* the best!" promised Bakugou.

*Whatever the hell **that** was supposed to mean.*

They sat in silence far longer than was socially acceptable. Izuku listened as the kid walked away. A door clicked shut. Muffled music started playing.

Closer to him, a chair creaked under the weight of the man. There was a light clink of keys being set on the table. Blackout was sitting beside him at the table. He could feel the chill of the spring air he brought in with him.

Izuku felt severely underdressed with his towels.

"What makes *you* so special, Mr Deku?" Blackout sighed. He spoke slowly, an unhurried cadence. Overconfident.

"Am I special, Mr. Blackout? I don't feel very special," Izuku said. He tried to keep his tone mild, but the urge to babble was strong.

"I'd prefer *Mr Nagami.* Did you know, there's not one viable future where you and I don't sit down at this table?" Blackout asked. The pause dragged on and Izuku was left wondering if the question wasn't rhetorical after all.

"There isn't?" Izuku asked.

"This meeting is practically fated," Blackout said.

Izuku waited for the rest, but there was nothing more.

This conversation felt like a staring contest.

"What do you want, Blackout?" Izuku asked. Izuku had no interest in power plays. He always knew who had the most power in any given situation, and it wasn't him. Being on the bottom rung meant these weird little prideful games meant very little to him.

That never seemed to stop villains from playing with their food.

"As I said, I prefer Mr. Nagami," Blackout said. "And I think you and I have a lot to talk about."

Ah. Blackout wanted to monologue.

Izuku *loved* monologues.

Monologues meant the villain wanted you to listen. Monologues meant time. Monologues meant information freely given.

(Monologues meant they planned to kill you.)

(But *not yet.*)

"What is there to talk about?" Izuku asked. *Disinterested. Draw it out* . Blackout thought himself clever, so let the bias lead. "The situation seems pretty clear to me."

"Ah, I'm sure the situation is very black and white to you," Blackout said.

"Nothing is 'black' or 'white' to me, right now."

"Perhaps I should have said *cut and dry*?"

"Not very dry either. Plenty cut."

"Idioms are wasted on you. No, the situation is not as simple as you might like to believe," Blackout said.

"Seems pretty basic. Hero and villain are alone in a room. Hero is tied to a chair. There's only a few ways it can go from there," Izuku said.

"*Hero. Villain.* Already you've simplified matters beyond reconciliation with reality," Blackout said.

"I'm sure it could be more nuanced if you let me out of the chair," Izuku said.

"Much more violent, I'm sure," Blackout agreed. "But hardly more nuanced. You already know you're not going anywhere."

"So what do you get out of this conversation? What could you possibly want from me?" Izuku asked.

"Do you know, I'm not really sure! All I know is that we need to be here, in this room, and we talk. *Exciting*, isn't it, not knowing," Blackout said.

"Not really a fan of it, myself," Izuku said.

"Ah, but you know more than you let on. More than anyone else, so far. How much, I wonder, have you figured out? How much did you need to know, to cause so much trouble," Blackout growled.

"I honestly didn't know anything until you decided I needed to be forcibly retired," Izuku said. "A lot of this could have been avoided if you hadn't made the first move."

"Put that together, did you? But once *again,* you over simplify. Not taking that first step would have had... less than desirable results," Blackout said.

"Like what?"

"Failure is failure, there's no need to examine it further," Blackout dismissed.

Well. *That certainly explained a lot.* "So me being tied up here and talking to you is success? Congratulations, you've bagged Deku, *the useless hero.* Where does that take you next?" Izuku said.

"It gives me an opportunity," Blackout said. Fabric shifted and Izuku felt crowded. He kept his breathing steady as Blackout leaned closer. "What people don't understand about the future is that nothing that happens now *guarantees* what happens next. All we have are options that lead to options, with very little correlation in between. The future is fragile, to those of us with plans for it, and obscure. Even with an advantage."

Blackout leaned back and Izuku released the breath he was holding.

"Again, it's too simple to ask 'what comes next'. What you really need to know is the context," Blackout said.

"And what is 'the context'?" Izuku asked.

"The context is that there isn't a day that went by that I wasn't putting in the work to build *this* future. Everything we have today is a result of my effort. And your *lack* of curiosity about my certainty of the future is suspicious," Blackout said.

"All villains think the future belongs to them," Izuku said. "They all talk about it like it's a sure thing."

"*Villain* , again! Oh my! I'm only as much a villain as you are a *hero*. No, I think you know about the foresight quirk," Blackout said.

Blackout was being too candid. Izuku tensed. "We suspected."

"And still you work against me. Even *knowing* it's futile," Blackout said.

"Trying to save people isn't wasted effort," Izuku said.

Izuku flinched away from the hand that was suddenly in his hair. He didn't get far, the grip was tight. Izuku fought to keep his breath steady as his head was pulled back, extending his neck.

(He wasn't hurt, he was fine, they were talking, there was time, *don't give it away,* he needed to focus, to breathe, don't let him see, don't *let him see how afraid...*)

"Do you even know *why* you oppose me? Do you even have *any idea* what you're fighting against? Or is this just the *blind flailings* of a man who's lost everything?" Blackout chuckled. " *Saving people.* What do you think I've been trying to *do* this whole time?"

Just as suddenly, the hand let go.

Izuku shuddered, neck sore from the rough treatment. His skin prickled in anticipation of another touch but none came.

Izuku *itched.*

"And yet... this is where it gets you. Tied to a chair. With me. As you said, there's only a few ways it can go from here," Blackout said. "The issue, the *real* problem, is that even though the end game is favorable, you've come closer to upending my plans than anyone ever has before. I need to know *how*."

Izuku remained silent. Blackout spoke with an intense conviction that sent a shiver down Izuku's spine.

(*This* was the Blackout prepared to blind someone without a quirk)

"I need context," Blackout said. "But we have time."

Izuku's breath stuttered. Time. Said with such.... anticipation. Patience. *Contentment.*

(Blackout hadn't even done anything to him yet, why was he being so pathetic? *It's rational and okay to be afraid, you hypocrite*.)

Beside him, Blackout sighed. "To be fair, it's much easier to destroy something than create it. Do you even know what you've been threatening? Do you know how much damage you've done?"

"Wh-" The words stuck in Izuku's throat like a bad dream. He pushed past it, voice cracking. "Why don't you tell me?"

Blackout laughed. "You know? *Why not.* We have some time."

He definitely wasn't planning on letting Izuku out of here alive.

"Do you remember what it was like back then? You would have been a kid, then. Just getting into high school. To you, it was probably normal. Kids never understand just how screwed up the world was. It just... was.

"Thursday, you were worried about the serial killer being blasted on the news. Wednesday, infrastructure collapsed from a tunneling villain battle. Then later that same day a bulletin goes out for anyone who had eaten red bean paste. Apparently a villain with a *jelly quirk* would be able to use it for *mind control.* How does that even make *sense*?

"And *that* was life. Days were nothing but a series of completely unprecedented disaster after

disaster. But, we survived, muddled through. You adapt or you die," Blackout chuckled dryly.

Izuku remembered those days. Abstractly, he knew it had been a large inspiration to him to be a hero, to *fix* things.

(Personally, he just wanted to stand between the crying kid and the bullies)

"Do you have any idea what that was like? The future was so volatile. So there were heroes, those bastions of light and peace, in a world like *that*. There's no wonder they worshiped them like gods; they were the only thing standing between you and disaster on any given day. But, a better hero bred a *better villain.* With all these overblown powers at layman's fingertips, people lost interest in an order that didn't suit them," Blackout said.

Izuku remembered a different side of the story. The threat of government registration, the fear and despair of an unfair system.

"I was a journalist, so I ended up seeing more than most. Investigative. I thought... Well, I guess I thought that if I could somehow get ahead of it, report on what was coming rather than the fallout. I thought... I don't know, maybe someone would be able to *do something.* A hero would be able to act before it was too late," Blackout said.

The worst was never reported on.

"So I looked in the unsightly places, the unholy ones. Met and identified the worst of the worst but still, I was always a step behind. There was always someone new, and the smart ones... the smart ones knew how to hide. So I dug deeper and found corruption everywhere. I don't think anyone realized how tenuous our society was, built on a rotten bedrock of lies and greed. What you saw... the crime you *saw* was people snapping. What was *driving it* was far worse," Blackout growled.

Fair, thought Izuku. He wasn't wrong, but for someone who chided him for simplifying, he sure glossed over the underworld's motivations. Izuku flexed his wrists, feeling the subtle click of restraints, weakened from impact, barely opening before snapping shut. He had to hide a wince as it pinched the tender skin of his wrist.

"I knew where to look. I knew all the stories before they broke, but it was never enough. There was too much happening for anyone to listen to one voice warning them about next week, when *this week* was already shit. But what else could I do? I still needed to *know.* It was the only way to survive, back then.

"And then I found the kid. There was this gambling ring, fairly typical, but extraordinarily successful. I thought they surely must be involved in something bigger, but they were just... good. Always a step ahead. Always in the know. And they *shouldn't have been.*

"It wasn't because they were smart; they were gambling their *own* money. They were *lucky* . Uncannily lucky. It turned out one of them had a kid with the holy grail of quirks. The kid was the future, quite literally. As long as you knew the right question *anything* was possible.

"And here was this den of...short sighted *thieves* using him to make small time money. Smacking him around like it would change the fucking *channel* of the future. It was as maddening as it was sickening. I knew, then, that I had to do something," said Blackout.

"Kid wasn't any happier with the situation than I was, so I came up with a plan. The quirk requires sight; you ask a question and see the answer depending on how many viable surfaces you have. And I... well*, I* had a way of making it look *broken* .

"You used your quirk on him," Izuku said.

"*Exactly!* It didn't take long for their whole operation to fall apart and the collectors to come collecting. I snuck the kid out in the chaos and we were home free. We stayed low for a while, stayed quiet. Kid had no idea what it was like to live a normal life with someone who didn't want to hurt him. Took three days for him to even look me in the eye!" Blackout said, pity thick in his voice.

And now that same kid is cowering down the hall from you, afraid you're going to blind him.

"Your perspective changes when you have someone to look out for. Suddenly, getting mugged on the way home from the corner store isn't just *me* getting hurt, it's the kid not getting fed. The train delay isn't an inconvenience, it's more time the kid spends alone and vulnerable. Those creeps eyeing kid's quirks aren't just a disgusting tragedy waiting to happen, they are a direct threat to my household," Blackout said, slapping the table.

How altruistic.

"How could I sit there and tell the kid things were going to get better when things were shit? I needed to do more than just anticipate what was coming, I needed to *change it,"* Blackout said.

"Because you knew better?" Izuku said. *Damn* .

Blackout was silent. He'd expected an immediate reaction, whether a laugh or a hit, but the silence was somehow more unnerving.

Suddenly there was pressure on the bridge of his nose. His face felt immediately hot, and he swore he could see white. Somehow he kept enough awareness not to pull his arms free and punch. *It wasn't time yet.* Just as quickly the pressure was removed, and he was left gasping in recovery.

"I'm not the one tied to a chair in rough shape," Blackout said mildly. "I'm not the one trying to destroy a peaceful future because of the tenants I learned from a *children's cartoon.* Objectively, factually, functionally, *I do know better.*

"And *you* are the fly in the ointment," Blackout said, flicking Izuku's head. Izuku flinched violently back and Blackout chuckled. "Listen, and maybe you'll learn something."

Blackout took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"It took a while to find our stride. Exploring the future one question at a time is like counting sand at the beach. Soon, I figured out how to optimize the process and well, I had built my whole *career* around asking questions. I have a nose for the right ones. Even then, cause and effect have an incredibly loose relationship; save an old woman's purse one day, and a politician resigns the next. It was almost as effective as tarot reading, except I could *see* the effect of any action I chose.

"Still, nothing would show more than a day or two in advance. Initially we thought it was a constraint of the quirk. But then...

"Then UA was attacked. I was angry; top hero school in the country and they can't even protect their *kids*. I could do a better job than that *rat,* I thought. So I asked the question and-!" Blackout was getting more animated, voice raising with emotion.

"Five years! Seven! A decade of futures opened up, headlines of newspapers detailing fall after fall of the worst, most vicious underground leaders I knew about. And I *knew*. I had been trying to blow the whistle on these names for years, and all it would take would be to remove *that*

rat," Blackout spat.

Cold dread sat in Izuku's gut. Ten years? He could see ahead *ten years?* They had severely underestimated him.

"At first I thought he was protecting them, that *sterling* principal of UA. That if he was removed, the rest would have nothing to hide under. But there was no future that exposed any of that, no court case that resulted in justice, no dirty secret to be uncovered. Then I *realized.*

"He was *scared* of them. Those names... all those criminals, were his *enemies s*et to fall if he was removed. He'd built a blackmail powder keg that he sat on to save his own skin. And he just... let them do whatever so long as *he was safe,"* Blackout growled.

No, thought Izuku, he just wasn't *finished.* Nedzu hadn't even gotten to Giran yet. Blackout's impatience had corrupted his whole plan.

"After that, the future was simple. It's always so much faster, so much more effective, to work outside the law. It holds progress back and means nothing to criminals. So I arranged for Principal Nedzu to be removed from the board and the slate was wiped clean.

"The shake up rattled the underground. It shook everything so hard that regular everyday people suddenly knew peace for the first time in centuries.

"And you know what? *It was nice,*" Blackout said.

"That's not how I remember it," Izuku said. Fear and hopelessness and dread. Nedzu had been missing. Everyone with a mutation quirk went into hiding.

"It was a time of *transition.* I needed to move quickly if I wanted to secure a future of peace and save it from the jackals. I worked tirelessly to find the right approach, the right direction that gave us the most peaceful years for the longest span.

"Sure, I had to consider things that aren't socially *fair*, but is it socially fair to let the few ruin all those ordinary lives for their selfish desires? Is it fair to destroy the community for the individual? Plenty of people don't have the stomach for it, even if it is the best possible outcome. But I could do it, and I did.

"Nobody wants to speak poorly of the children, but I could see it. Kids were getting more powerful every year. We weren't set up to control them. *I* noticed. I noticed that the kids with the more powerful quirks *showed it*. Some of them even came from animals; trashing a city block out of the blue because someone decided to let their rabbits *fuck.* The closer you *look* to baseline human, the closer you actually *are*. There's the odd exception, of course, the odd *chameleon.* But they are easy to pick out once you've removed all the serious mutations," Blackout said, like it was a simple policy and not about destroying lives.

"So policy was easy to weigh in favor of the ordinary civilian. Anyone powerful enough to be disruptive needed *special treatment,* and you can identify ninety percent of them with the naked eye. I am building a world where someone like *you* can survive the everyday. This world is for you, and everyone like you, who just want to live peacefully. *I gave that to them,"* said Blackout.

Full revolutional visionary, then.

"So why shouldn't I take control? Why shouldn't it have been me? I wouldn't expect you to understand. You're merely a foot soldier. But for someone who can see the bigger picture, someone who can plan for it, someone who can engineer peace, it makes *sense.*

"People aren't constantly in fear, now. Being a hero is a normal job, one you can expect to come home from. Even after your little quirkless revolution, how many actually *died?* Powerless people doing the most dangerous job in the world and most of them retire, invalidated, but not dead. I ask you, would that have happened in the world the way it was?

"What it comes down to is that society is not equal, and we shouldn't treat it as such. Everyone is just part of the working whole. They need to *accept their place,"* Blackout said.

"And your place is at the top, of course," Izuku said. A hand tugged on his hair in warning.

"Naturally. Look at my track record. Even you can agree that a firm hand has worked wonders for the general public. Sure, it doesn't work for *everyone.* You can't make everyone happy. But the children have a world to grow up in.

"If they have the right quirk," Izuku said. The hand tightened on his hair and Izuku tried to relax his muscles, to go with the movement as he shook Izuku's head in emphasis.

"Exactly! As it should be. As it needs to be. And here *you* come along, ready to destroy it."

"So you saw this moment from ten years ago?" Izuku asked. The hand let go.

"Do not *simplify* my work. The future is mutable and ineffable. A month ago we noticed the possible timelines shrinking. The news started to print more problematic stories than the latest Scandal publicity stunt. And in the middle of it was *you.*

"You, and *that rat,*" Blackout spat.

People really got hung up on the rat features. Izuku always wondered how they missed the pointed teeth and retractable claws.

There was a skittering in the walls. The crk crk crk of chewing... and... more skittering?

Then a muffled boom.

"Ah, already?" Blackout sighed. "That went quicker than expected."

Shit. Whatever this was, Blackout was expecting it. Wasn't worried about it.

Was Kacchan here to put the final nail in the coffin?

The room shuddered and the music playing in the other room cut out. The quiet breeze of the fan cut off. The fire alarm beeped. A hiss of a match as Blackout presumably lit a candle.

Down the hallway, a door creaked open.

"Saki?" came the kid's wavering voice. More skittering picked up from the walls. Something started scratching.

"In here kid, it's okay," Blackout said. Izuku felt a cold trickle of doubt at the softness in Blackout's voice. Whatever else he was, he'd been the kid's guardian for years. Would he really choose to help Izuku when it came down to it?

The kid wasn't in this for ideals. He just didn't want to be blinded.

(Could Izuku really keep him safe?)

Soft footsteps gained confidence the closer they got.

"You want to light the big one?" Blackout asked. Another snapping hiss as a match was lit.

"What... what's going on?" the kid asked quietly.

"Deku and I have just been talking," Blackout said "Nothing you need to worry about."

"Are... what's out there?" the kid asked.

"Come sit down. You turned off your phone like I told you?" Blackout asked.

"R-r-right," said the kid, sliding a chair along the floor. A tap was turned on, a container filled and set on the table. Blackout took his seat next to Izuku. "What's the bowl for?"

"It's probably better if we don't use the TV right now," Blackout said. "So it's back to basics."

"Um. What are... what are you going to, um, ask me about?" the kid asked.

"Nothing you need to worry about," Blackout said. "Here, hold the bowl, it needs proximity when you're trying to channel through water, right?"

"Um, I... what if... what if I don't want to..." the kid mumbled.

"Sorry?" Blackout asked "You don't want to? It's not really your call, is it kid?"

"It's my quirk!" the kid burst out. Izuku tried to hide his wince. Now was not the time to antagonize the man, Izuku needed to wait for the right moment to break free, not a moment before, but he would have to if Blackout went for the kid now.

"Excuse me?" Blackout said, voice lowered dangerously. "What are you talking about?"

"Deku said...-!" the kid started before stopping himself with a gasp.

"What?" Blackout asked softly. "Deku said what?"

"Nothing," said the kid. Izuku tensed against the chair.

"I thought you said you didn't talk to him," Blackout said.

"I didn't... I, Saki, please. I..."

There was a thump. Someone had hit the table sharply. The kid suppressed a whimper, Izuku tested the restraints.

"Saki, it was nothing... we just... it's *nothing* , Saki," the kid pleaded. "Can we just... move on? It doesn't *matter* -"

Blackout scoffed.

"No," he said, "I think we should all sit down and have a little chat about why you decided to *lie* to me."

Chapter End Notes

Is there anything more self-indulgent than a villain's monologue? Big uninterrupted walls of text, explain all the plot that's been driving the belly of this beast.

Turns out, *I* was the villain all along!

The Last Fight

Chapter Summary

Punches solve problems.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The silence was suffocating, and Izuku said that as someone with half his airways blocked. They were getting close to the moment of action, and he needed to be ready. He couldn't afford to react too late, he'd promised the kid-!

If he moved too *early* it would...

It would what, exactly? What in the actual hell was he waiting for? He knew the kid had the foresight quirk, he knew where Blackout was, he'd got the monologue.

(Back up wasn't coming. No one even knew where he was.)

But he only had one chance. The cuffs around his wrist were strong, it would take a great deal of strength to open them. He needed that starting-gun kick of adrenaline if he was going to bust free.

Blackout wouldn't give him a second chance.

"Well?" asked Blackout. "You *knew* you weren't to talk to him. I told you-"

"I don't know anything!" the kid screamed. "You *never* actually tell me anything!"

"What are you talking about? You don't *want* to know. You've *never* wanted to *actually know,* " Blackout said.

"It's my quirk!" the kid yelled.

"What has he been telling you? Of *course* it's your quirk," Blackout said.

"You're just *using* me! Like them, like my-"

"I'm doing this for you!" Blackout roared. "I'm doing what's best so that you can *have* a future. What does this hero even know? What could he possibly have said to make you so unreasonable?"

"You *lied* to me!"

"Is that what he told you? Is that what's making you so angry? Kid, I've been protecting you. There are things no kid should have to know, and I-" Blackout said.

"Then why would you... why do you... Is *blinding* me good for me?" the kid demanded.

"Is that what's bothering you?" Blackout sighed. "We've been over this, kid, you're never *actually* going to go blind. We avoid those futures, remember? I wouldn't do that to you."

"But you have," the kid said.

"Temporarily. To save you," Blackout said. "I can't believe I need to explain this to you, I thought you could understand that..."

"No, you have to *mean to* blind me for it to work with my quirk," the kid said.

"Is that what Deku told you? He doesn't understand anything about your quirk, why would-"

"No, I figured it out myself!" the kid snapped back. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

"Oh? And this little... tantrum is supposed to convince me?" Blackout asked. "Deku would say anything to get out of this, you can't trust what he says. It means nothing!"

"You don't understand!" the kid huffed. "Mr. Deku didn't tell me anything."

"Then where's this 'it's my quirk' nonsense coming from? You used to trust me."

"You lied to me!" the kid shouted.

"What? When did I ever-"

"The gun! The *gun* , Saki! I *shot someone* because you lied about the *gun!"*

"That? You... I was protecting you," Saki growled.

"I almost *murdered* someone," the kid breathed.

"You would have freaked out if I'd told you it was live," Blackout said.

"Yeah, but they would have been safe!"

"Safe? You want to talk about *safe!?* Nothing is safe! It would be worse if it weren't for my work! You remember how it was? In hiding? Not knowing?" Blackout said. "This *is* the safe option!"

"Well, I don't want to do it anymore!" the kid said.

There was silence but for the harsh panting of the kid and the creak of Blackout's knuckles. Blackout started chuckling, though it took Izuku a while to place the rhythmic huffing and clicking until the laughter got loud enough to identify.

"No?" Blackout said smoothly. "Ok. Ok then. But can you at least tell me what Deku said to you that made you change your mind?"

Such a soft, easy going voice. A benevolent teacher, an easy going parent. The abrupt shift in tone sent a prickle right up Izuku's back.

The kid seemed to have no such reservation. "Uh. He... he just asked me what I wanted," the kid said. "And. And I don't want to do this anymore."

"Ok," Blackout sighed. "Ok, I just need to do one more thing."

There was a shuffle of paper and the scratch of a pen.

"Can you read this for me?" Blackout asked the kid.

" *'Don't leave the kid alone with Deku'* , what? Why are you-"

Izuku felt cold wash over him. His fingers started to tingle in that tell-tale way.

Soon .

"Are you familiar with multiverse theory?" Blackout asked, fabric rustling. Blackout stood up, scraping the chair along the floor.

"Uh, like in the comics?" the kid asked.

"Basically. The theory goes that every decision happens both ways. In one world, you eat the cookie, and in the other you don't. Both exist, both are real," Blackout said.

"Um, what does-"

"I have a theory that your quirk works along similar lines. You don't see the future so much as every possible future. With multiverse theory, it means all those futures exist," Blackout explained.

"What are you-"

"Kid," Izuku said in warning and got a smack to his head for his trouble. The ache echoed through his face and centered on the bridge of his nose.

His eyes watered.

"All I'm doing is giving a warning to an alternate me that this future isn't viable," Blackout said. "It's not pleasant work, but I'm not doing this for *myself* . I'm doing this for the *future* ."

"Wait, but... no!" the kid stumbled back.

"Kid, stay behind me," Izuku said. He felt the kid tuck behind the chair.

"What's wrong, kid? I thought you wanted out. I'm just... *showing you* the way out," Blackout said calmly, stepping towards them. "Delaying it will just make you more scared. Deku can't help you."

"Stop! I'll help, *I'll help!* Please don't do this, *please!"* the kid sobbed.

"More lies?" Blackout clicked his tongue. "Deku really has been a bad influence."

There was a quiet 'click' that Izuku didn't like the sound of.

"Kid, what am I dealing with?" Izuku asked. A knife would be tough, but not impossible. He had towels to wrap around his forearms. A gun would...

Worry about that later.

"I'll deal with you later," Blackout said.

"A laser," the kid whispered. "He's got a laser"

Well.

"Close your eyes," Izuku warned, and pulled. Tendons screamed at him as he wedged apart the linked cuffs, but they went. Izuku ducked forward with a shout, pulling his hands free of the back of the chair and swinging them around front. Blackout was somewhere to the right.

Izuku rolled off the chair, bracing his elbows over his head. He crashed into Blackout's legs, which startled both of them, and then they were grappling on the floor.

Izuku threw his weight forward, slamming into an arm and torso. Blackout's other hand clubbed his ear. Izuku, his arms still regaining feeling, clumsily came up to protect it.

His wrists got too close together and snapped together in front of him.

Blackout was trying to squirm away, so Izuku braced his weight on his elbows on Blackout's chest. The sudden pressure knocked the wind out of Blackout and he wheezed.

"Mr. Deku, what do I do?" the kid asked.

Shit.

"Get out of here!" Izuku yelled. Blackout's knee drove into his side, rolling Izuku off and over. Izuku took short breaths to work through the pain, forcing his body to roll back in an attempt to pin Blackout again.

The man grunted as Izuku made contact, and again as Izuku swung his bound hands at...

Well, his face, going by the feeling of teeth digging into the meat of his hands. Blackout screamed into his fists and Izuku yanked them away.

"Fuck!" Izuku shouted, tangling his legs with Blackout to keep him from getting away.

"Mr. Deku!" the kid said.

Why was he still here?

"Kid, seriously, get out," Izuku said.

"I don't know where to go!" the kid wailed.

"Anywhere that's not here!" Izuku shouted. He managed to loop his hands back over Blackout's neck. The man took the opportunity to slam his forehead into Izuku's.

Oh fuck fuck *fuck* , said the part of Izuku's mind that wasn't whited out in pain. He was pretty sure he stopped breathing at some point, judging by the wave of dizziness.

(Or that was the concussion)

He took a gasping breath, forcing his lungs to work through seized muscles. Blackout was swearing constantly and steadily, trying to work his way out of Izuku's iron grip.

"What about you, Mr. Deku!" the kid was saying, "I can't leave you here, I have to-"

"Kid, *please leave,* " Izuku gritted out. "I'm *fine* ."

Blackout went still in his grasp. He shuffled ineffectively, but not with the vigor of earlier.

Izuku wasn't choking him was he? He re-adjusted his grip.

Suddenly, Izuku's eye started... stinging. Burning. Ready tears poured forth, but there was no relief.

"Close your eyes!" the kid said. Izuku blinked rapidly.

"Shut up, kid," Blackout growled. Plenty of air, then.

"What?"

"Close your eyes! He's using the laser!" the kid shouted.

Well fuck. Izuku slammed his eyes closed, and knowing what the issue was made it feel ten times worse. They felt gritty and stung like nothing else, an ache setting in behind. Izuku felt the impossible need to distance himself from his face. Blackout wedged a hand between them to try and pry open Izuku's other eye.

"Kid, you need to go now!" Izuku shouted, trying to pull back from his hold on Blackout, but his hands were stuck together on the other side of his neck. Izuku's other eye started stinging, Blackout must have opened it enough to start causing damage.

With a yell Izuku pulled his hands apart and rolled away. He hit the table leg with his hip.

Behind him, Blackout was getting to his feet.

"Where are you even going to go?" he asked. Izuku ducked back underneath the table. "The city is in gridlock, nothing is running."

The hell was he talking about?

"Away from you is a good first step," Izuku said. He brought his hands (a good distance apart) above him until they settled on the underside of the table.

"You'll wear yourself out soon enough," Blackout said mildly, as though he hadn't just been rolling around on the floor.

"Fuck off!" Izuku yelled.

A warm weight suddenly leaned into Izuku's back.

"The front door is jammed," the kid whispered, pressing his head against Izuku's back.

Great .

Izuku took a breath. "It'll be fine," he lied. Then he braced himself against the floor and pushed up and over, flinging the table down sideways between them and Blackout. Blackout growled and took a stomping step towards them.

And then the apartment exploded.

The blackout extended like a bruise below her. Lights glittered in the distance where the squirrels hadn't reached yet. The darkness extended in fits and starts as the strange animals indiscriminately destroyed streetlights and power hubs.

Hanging in her arms, limp like a cat, Shouto examined the paper map against the dark expanse.

"I have no idea where we are," he said.

"Want to know a secret?" Ochako asked.

"Always."

"I'm just following Bakugou," she said. Down below them, Bakugou rocketed from one street to the next like a combustible grasshopper. He was reading the street signs as he went, having lost sight of Ochako a while ago. Her jets were dim enough to not give them away.

"What was all that 'we'll leave you behind if you can't keep up' then?"

"Bakugou is a control freak, you need to keep him on the back foot if you don't want to get walked over," Ochako said. "Besides, it's fun to wind him up. If we time it right, we can touch down right before he gets there."

"Lovely," Shouto said. "At least he's useful right now. I was surprised he was so insistent on looking for Deku."

"He feels guilty," Ochako said.

"I find that hard to believe," Shouto said, watching the little spark jump five streets at a time.

"Despite all evidence to the contrary, Bakugou cares about Deku very much," Ochako said. "It's just the kind of relationship that will end with one of them killing the other."

"Who do you think would win?" Shouto asked.

"Shouto, *no.* You don't place bets on murder," Ochako scolded.

"Is that one of those rules that are made to be broken, or..." Shouto asked.

"No, it's a rule that prevents you from being labeled an accessory to murder," Ochako explained.

"Hm," said Shouto.

The thoughtful tone worried Ochako.

Below them, Bakugou was making shorter and shorter hops. "I think that's our cue," Ochako said. "Recognize anything yet?"

"I didn't pick them out by their roof," Shouto said, affronted. "But it should be to the north of that park... that is a park, right?"

Bakugou disappeared under some foliage.

"I think so," Ochako said. "Hold onto your map, I'm going to use you as an anchor."

"As a whaaaaaA-!?" Shouto yelped as gravity returned to them and they started plummeting. Ochako slammed a hand over his mouth. Screaming would alert Bakugou. The wind whistled past so fast it was hard to breathe, but it would only last...

a...

few...

...seconds.

Ochako reversed her jets and provided a thorough weight loss treatment to Shouto. They landed neatly in front of a fuming Bakugou.

Shouto licked her hand.

"Gross!" she shouted, all thoughts of triumph lost. She wiped her hand on Shouto's shoulder and he burned it off.

"Seriously?" Bakugou growled. "This is how you children operate a rescue mission, and *I'm* the one who lost Deku?"

"So you *admit it,* " Ochako crowed.

" *Shut up!* Where's this entrance you keep blathering about?" Bakugou demanded.

"It's not an entrance *yet* ," Shouto said.

"Are you *freaking* kidding me? I drag you along because apparently you know something helpful, and now we're just going to *bust down a wall?* " Bakugou asked.

"You still need to know which wall," Shouto said, stalking away. Ochako jogged to keep up, Bakugou stomping behind.

Soon enough they were hiding under a tree by a low rise. Shouto pointed out one of the dark windows and Bakugou launched himself at it before Shouto could finish explaining the layout. With a growl, Ochako launched after him. Ice creaked and groaned behind her as Shouto built his ramp.

Bakugou lined up his shot.

"Careful, you don't-" Ochako started to warn, visions of Deku being buried in rubble on the other side flashing like a premonition.

"I'm a *god-damned professional,"* he screamed in time with the explosion.

Ochako was already moving, diving through the wall the moment it crumbled. She landed in a roll on a debris covered bed.

The room was empty.

Bakugou was already out in the hallway, war cry far too loud for indoors. Ochako followed, making it into the main room just in time to see a frazzled man in a suit fall through the floor, avoiding Bakugou's fist by a hair.

Deku stood bleeding and shirtless behind an overturned table, a kid clinging to his back. His eyes were clenched shut. A single stubborn candle burned on the floor.

"What the fuck," said Bakugou, stomping on the now-sealed floor where the man had slipped through.

"Kacchan?" Deku asked, not dropping his guard.

"Deku!" Ochako said. "You're alive!"

"Ochako!" Deku breathed a sigh of relief. "I am so glad you're here!"

"What about me!?" Bakugou growled. "And where the fuck did he go?"

"He called someone called Taki for evac, from the context I'd say-"

"Izuku, why do you look worse every time I see you?" Shouto asked, stepping into the room cool as anything. Deku squeaked.

"Sh-sh-shouto! I-" Deku stuttered.

"Focus, bird brain! From the context *what?"* Bakugou demanded.

"Portal quirk. Or tunneling? I'd say-"

Ochako was startled by Nedzu's voice from her collar. *"Ms. Uraraka, please pass the cam and mic over!'"*

"Right!" Ochako unclipped the little devices.

"Nedzu?" Deku cocked his head.

"Midoriya, this is important," Nedzu said. *"You are with Blackout?"*

"Uh, I was?" Deku said.

"Deku, catch!' Ochako said, tossing the little cat pins over. They bounced off Deku's chest and fell pathetically to the ground. Deku flinched.

Oops!

"What the *hell,* airhead?" Bakugou snapped.

"I forgot he can't see! I'm sorry!" Ochako said. "I got caught up in the moment!"

"Izuku's still closing his eyes," Shouto said, rubbing salt in the wound like a true friend.

"This is important!" Nedzu scolded. *"Did any of you see or notice Blackout carrying a device?"*

"Uh, he had a laser?" Deku said.

The kid hiding behind Deku crouched and grabbed for the tiny devices.

"Here's one!" he said, placing one in Deku's hand.

"I have reason to believe Blackout is carrying an 'off switch' for the squirrels," Nedzu continued.

"The squirrels are 'on'?" Deku asked. "I thought they didn't do anything."

"Do you have the mic?" Nedzu said from somewhere on the floor. It was hard to see it against the floor. Ochako stepped forward to help find it.

"No, I have to-"

"Fuck! Stop messing around! We have to find Blackout. What kind of quirk was it? Where is he?" Bakugou demanded. He looked ready to make his own hole in the floor.

"Kid?" Deku asked.

"Taki... um Taki has a short range portal quirk, but I don't know whe-"

A hole opened under the kid and Deku, dropping them out of existence in an instant. Ochako's hand slammed into the floor as it closed just before she reached it.

"Fuck!" she said, hitting the floor for good measure. God *damn* her hand hurt.

"Good job, Cheeks!" Bakugou said.

"The child said 'short range', they must be close by," Shouto said, heading back to their make-shift entrance. "If we split-"

"They're in a parking garage!" Nedzu said. Ochako hastily grabbed the little mic.

"There's one under this building," Shouto said. Ochako didn't wait for him to finish, she was already through the hallway and falling before the end.

As soon as the wind stopped rushing in her ears she could hear the yelling; the high pitched wail of a kid and the bark of adults giving commands. Ochako raced around the building until she found the entrance, caged with a security gate. It barely slowed her down.

"Hurry!" Nedzu urged.

Ahead there was the warm orange glow of road flares. The smoke and flickering underlighting transformed the fairly unremarkable structure into a hellscape. Ochako launched herself forward, cheating gravity for a speed boost.

Ochako rounded the last corner to see Deku on his knees, gun at his head. Blackout stood over him, turned away from Ochako. To the right stood two men. One held back the kid who was fighting his grip desperately.

Ochako was not a stealth hero . Her moves were big and flashy but sometimes the best solution came from an oblique angle.

Hopefully this little stunt wouldn't get Deku killed.

Ochako landed heavily on the ground. The noise had all heads turning towards her. Both her hands were pressed desperately to the ground, channeling her energy down and out.

No announcements this time.

"Deku, duck!" Ochako yelled, launching herself forward.

All around her, cars lifted off their suspension. The subtle momentum lifted them off the ground. Deku, used to zero-g, was braced against the ground, fingers clinging to cracks in the concrete. The kid's struggles had him and his assailant drifting towards the ceiling. And Blackout...

Blackout had been bracing against the weight of a gun. Startled, he fired before realizing he was aiming at the ceiling, and the recoil sent him straight into Ochako's waiting fist. She took vicious glee in the crack of knuckles against his face.

If Ochako wasn't a stealth hero, Bakugou and Shouto weren't anything less than a full parade.

With elephants.

Bakugou entered the scene with a roar and blinding blast. Cars and people were blown back easily.

Ochako released her hold on everything to prevent the cars from hitting the structure like cannon balls.

Ice grew up the walls instantly. The reflection of the flares brightened everything significantly, but by this time Blackout and his goons had regained their bearings.

Shouto's fire blast was suddenly redirected by a portal, bathing Bakugou in flame. He screeched as the heat set off his gauntlets, blowing him back and through a wall of ice.

Ochako's horizontal dive was redirected into her tackling Deku. The abrupt change in direction nearly had her hurling, but long practice kept it down. Deku braced himself against her shoulders.

And somewhere, Blackout still had a gun.

"What is going on?" Nedzu asked.

"Busy," Ochako gasped. One of Blackout's men had rounded on them, grinning. She pulled Deku behind one of the overturned cars. "I'm clipping the mic into Deku's hair," she said. Deku held up the little camera and she did the same with it.

There was a sudden screech of metal and the car they were hiding behind disappeared. A man stood staring down at them.

"Ochako, we need to get that device from Blackout," Deku muttered.

"Maybe we should worry about the gun, first," Ochako said, backing away. Her range was limited while shielding Deku. The man advanced, reaching an arm out to touch one of the tumbled cars. "Or maybe this guy."

"I see him," Nedzu said from Deku's hair. *"Leave him to us."*

Deku nodded firmly.

"No more of that, Midoriya, keep your head steady," Nedzu scolded.

"Right! Ochako, go, we've got this," Deku said.

Ochako wasn't so sure, but she hadn't been Deku's friend for so long by not trusting him. "I'll get Blackout."

A flurry of squeaks sent Deku flying at the man, fists swinging. Ochako prepared to go over their heads when Deku got too close to the car. He was jerked sideways sharply with a sudden clang.

The goon started laughing.

"Fuck, the *magnets!* " Deku shouted, trying to tug his cuffed wrist away from the metal underbody of the car.

"Figured it out, did you?" the man said, retaliating with a gut punch. Deku gasped.

And then Ochako was on him with a war cry.

Special moves were great, but nothing beat some well placed fists at close range. Ochako got three solid hits in before the man even realized he'd changed opponents. He was built, though, so while it drove him back he didn't go down. He blocked Ochako's next punch with a forearm.

Ochako spun and ducked under his retaliation. She barely dodged the knee coming at her face, but managed to turn his momentum against him with a throw. He grunted as he hit the ceiling and stuck there.

"Die!"

Beside Deku, the car exploded into fiery pieces. Bakugou stood heaving behind it, hands smoking.

Deku stumbled away from the wreckage, debris stuck to his metal cuff. "Kacchan, *property damage!* "

" *That's* all you have to say?!" Bakugou roared.

"Backup incoming," Nedzu announced.

Above them, the goon had re-oriented and was preparing to launch back towards them.

Ochako dropped him right into Bakugou's fist. The explosion was enough to knock him out, and with practiced ease he was bound and dropped on the floor.

"We need to get that device off Blackout," Deku said. "We need to save the kid."

"*'We'* nothing, nerd, you stay here," Bakugou growled, turning back to the battle where Shouto was holding off the portal quirk single handedly.

Something had changed, though. Ochako blinked. There were so many portals that it looked like the typical three dimensions had given up and filled in the rest with bullshit. Shouto was dodging his own ice and flame more than the enemy, though the other goon was firmly in the center of it.

Off to the side, Blackout was a grim spectator, arm curled around the kid's neck. He held the gun loosely in his other hand, but as she watched he brought it up to aim at Shouto's back.

"Shouto!" Ochako cried. "Gun!"

Shouto raised a column of ice around himself. Blackout snarled and turned the gun on her.

This is not her first rodeo.

Ochako brought her hands up in a loose ready stance.

She only needed to touch it and it would lose all momentum. It was a dangerous but *very cool* trick.

At the last second, Blackout shifted his aim and fired at Deku. Deku flinched right, and blood blossomed from his shoulder. He collapsed to his knees with a scream.

"Deku!" Ochako yelled, running to shield him. He clutched his shoulder tightly with the opposite hand, muttering.

"Shit fuck shit shit fuck, god *damn* ," he was saying.

Ochako could relate.

Bakugou took advantage of the distraction to launch himself over that non-euclidean mess and fry the gun. In a surprisingly rational choice of priorities, Bakugou grabbed for the kid first, tossing

him bodily at Ochako before reaching for Blackout.

Just to have Blackout slip under his hand and into a portal.

"God damned *portals!* " Bakgou snarled, firing a blast at where Blackout had been.

Ochako had her arms full of shaking kid. He clung to her tightly. Behind her Nedzu was freaking out like an absent parent.

"Midoriya! Where are you hurt? Can you hear me? What is-" Nedzu's voice reached pitches that made the device crackle in protest.

"Just his shoulder!" Ochako said.

"Get them out of here," Bakugou snapped, rounding back on them.

"Kacchan, the device!" Deku interrupted his litany of curses to say.

"Worry about your own damned self," Bakugou said.

"Midoriya, get out of there!" Nedzu said. *"You need to-"*

"Is that the rat?" Blackout said, suddenly behind Deku. Ochako wheezed as the kid's arms tightened around her neck.

"Blackout," Nedzu snarled.

"It's too bad you couldn't bother to be here yourself," Blackout said, a hand tight in Deku's hair, pulling his head back. He plucked the mic and put it in a pocket. Deku grit his teeth and made noise that sounded like a curse but was definitely *not* a word.

Shouto came skidding out of the portal mess only to be scooped up by a fresh one and thrown right back in.

Bakugou took a threatening step towards Blackout.

"Taki!" Blackout shouted. "Get the other one!"

Bakugou stepped off one forming portal and straight into another. Ochako was left with Blackout, Deku and the kid.

"What do you want, Blackout?" Nedzu said, muffled by the fabric.

"This isn't a negotiation," Blackout said. "This is clean up."

"The device," Deku grit out. "Ochako, you need to-"

Blackout shook him. "This isn't a fight! Don't talk like you still have options!"

Ochako pulled the kid's arms away from her neck. Pushed him behind her. Explosions rocked the underground structure as Bakugou tried to force his way out.

"Deku," Ochako said. She wasn't even sure what she was trying to communicate; whether it was an apology, a plea or an order.

Luckily, Deku always had an idea.

He dropped his hand from his injury. Twisted in Blackout's hold.

And bit his arm.

Blackout howled and wrenched away, bringing his other hand around to pry Deku off him. Deku, released, rolled away. Ochako was now free to be violent.

Unfortunately, her fist passed right through air as he was saved by yet *another* portal.

Ochako screamed.

Flame and ice billowed outward from the tangle of portals, Shouto's and Bakugou's battle cry distorted by the tortured space. Underneath all of it bubbled raucous laughter.

An opening formed between the portals as they folded back like petals. Ochako hardly recognized the man, so torn and enlarged his form. His eyes were so bloodshot they looked red, and sweat glistened over his skin. His shirt was gone, lost to the bulk the drug gave him. He stood like a demon in the middle of a firestorm, Blackout behind him.

"You don't stand a *chance* against me!" Taki screamed.

Bakugou and Shouto stood back to back, burned and bloody from friendly fire. They were conserving their energy, waiting for an opening that wouldn't backfire.

"Because *I am a god!* " Taki roared. Portals yawned open behind him, fragmenting into tinier and tinier pieces. The concrete above and below and *god knows where* shredded into sand, falling endlessly into the recursive abyss.

Ochako prepared to enter the fight. If she could get in close enough she might have a chance. Or give the others the opening they needed.

And then...

...a figure dashed in, and the mess of portals collapsed like a house of cards. Breathing heavily, the person approached the fuming Taki, who ineffectively pulled at the air in practiced motions. The figure stalked forward with the grace of a big cat, hair raised like a mane.

Aizawa Sensei.

Taki, hopped up on quirk enhancer, finally seemed to come to the realization that his wasn't working and turned to run.

Shouto beaned him with a brick of ice.

Taki collapsed.

"Now it's just you," said Ochako, staring at Blackout.

"No," he said. "No, this isn't-!"

"It's over," Aizawa said.

"Is it though?" said Blackout, pulling something from his jacket.

Shouto took a step towards him.

"This is what you're after, isn't it?" Blackout said. Whatever he had pulled from his coat flashed in his hand. Before anyone could respond, he waved it at them, as though to ward them off. "No! No, you're going to stay back!"

He panted harshly in the quiet, smiling like a demon.

"That's right. Stay back!" he said. "Or I'll destroy it."

As though summoned by the promise of destruction, a small furry 'squirrel' bounded towards Blackout and his device. Bakugou caught it behind the head like a snake. He shook it at Blackout.

"We're done listening to you," Bakugou snarled. "We'll fucking figure it out. You're *finished!"*

"Oh?" Blackout laughed. "You still think this is just a blackout, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" Shouto asked. "What else do they do?"

"You already know what they do," Blackout said. "But what do you think happens when they run out of artificial power sources to gnaw on?"

"They won't have anything left to attack! We'll clean them up!"

"They move on to biological ones," Blackout continued, ignoring the interruption.

"Shit," said Deku.

"Taser-brain is a hero, he'll be fine," Bakugou scoffed.

"No, Kacchan, it's-"

"I've always thought you heroes were brain dead, but that still won't be enough to save you," Blackout laughed. "You know what? This timeline's fucked. Maybe I should destroy it anyway, end things properly and take you all down with me."

"You seriously settled on electric zombie squirrels as the best plan?" came a tinny voice from Blackout's pocket. The breath caught in Ochako's throat.

Oh Hitoshi you beautiful-

"Y-"

And Blackout froze.

Not in the 'dropping temperature' kind of way, but in the 'nobody's behind the wheel' kind.

"Someone please take the thing from him, I won't be able to hold him long," Hitoshi grit out from the little mic. Shouto snapped to, pulling the silvery thing safely away.

"Do I just press the one that says off?" Shouto asked.

"*Oh my god,* just do it!" Bakugou shouted.

"Just didn't want to get caught up in the moment and make things worse," Shouto said.

That sassy little-

"The off button would be lovely, Mr Todoroki," Nedzu said from the com.

Shouto, with great ceremony, brought his other hand over in an arc to press the off button.

The squirming squirrel in Bakugou's grip went limp.

Blackout's arms dropped, life coming back into his frame as Hitoshi's quirk lost its grip. "What was.. I-"

Bakugou punched him.

Chapter End Notes

This is it! Only the 'epilogue' left after this :)

The Wedding of Todoroki Shouto

Chapter Summary

Things get .. wrapped up? Todo gets married.

I think.

Chapter Notes

It is done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The truck rattled and rolled underneath them. Izuku didn't need to see to be able to tell they were going too fast; he could *feel* it.

"I really think you should let me drive," Shouto said from up front.

"I'd sooner let *Deku* drive," Kacchan said.

"Izuku can't see," Shouto said.

"That's - *Oh my god! That's what I MEANT! Even DEKU would be a better choice..."* and there he went. Izuku tuned him out reflexively. It was not hard, as he's wedged in the back beside Blackout, with Aizawa on the other. Izuku had been in more awkward situations, but was hard pressed to recall anything specific. Though Blackout was firmly bound Izuku was hyper aware of every flinch and shift the man made.

"You think you've won," Blackout growled. Izuku sighed. "You think this is a *victory* and not a *temporary setback* ."

Aizawa sighed. "Midoriya, how's your arm," he asked.

"Trying not to think about it, Sensei," Izuku said. They'd taken the time to give his arm a field dressing, but the general consensus was that getting back to UA would be better done sooner than later.

"When everything falls apart you're going to be *begging* me to come back and fix it," Blackout continued. "You have no idea the damage you've done."

"Why is it when your nose is broken that it gets so itchy?" Izuku asked. Generally, it wasn't good to discuss anything sensitive in front of the villain.

"I have no idea," Aizawa sniffed. "But casts are worse."

"I'll put *you* in a cast! If you think even for a second that I'm going to cooperate-" Blackout said. Then the truck stopped with a lurch.

"Shit," Shouto said. Kacchan was conspicuously silent.

"What? What's happening?" Izuku asked. A car door opened.

"...exit the vehicle, and stand down!" someone was saying from outside.

"I'll take care of it," Shouto said.

"Don't make it worse," Kacchan said.

"Already a fugitive, can't get much worse," Shouto said. "Izuku, I'll see you at the wedding."

"Wait, Shouto what are you-" Izuku demanded, but the door was already closed. "Kacchan, what's happening?"

"Hawks looks pissed," Kacchan said.

"Hawks? *What is Shouto doing?"* Izuku asked.

"Making things worse," Kacchan grumbled, and gunned the engine. Izuku was knocked into Blackout's shoulder with a grunt.

"Go back! We can't leave him there we-" Izuku yelled.

"Midoriya!" Aizawa snapped. "He'll be fine. We have a job to do. No one is going to hurt the golden Todoroki, particularly not Hawks. At worst he'll end up bored in a cell. Nedzu will handle it. It's *fine* ."

Izuku settled back, though worry gnawed at him. They rode in uncomfortable silence (if you ignored Kacchan's cursing and Blackout's attempts to get a rise out of them) until once again the truck slowed to a stop.

"What now?" Izuku asked.

"Bakugou, don't say anything, I'll handle this," Aizawa said, voice tense.

"Why are you telling me to keep quiet when you've got *motormouth* here?" Kacchan griped.

"Midoriya, don't say anything terrible," Aizawa said.

"Hey!"

A door was opened and there was an expectant silence. The vehicle shifted as whoever was at the door hoisted themself up. Even with Izuku's broken nose he could taste the smoke wafting in.

"Giran," Aizawa said. Izuku stiffened and Blackout started laughing.

Nedzu kept half an ear on the audio filtering in from Midoriya's team. Mostly it had been pointless bickering, but he found himself unable to stop. Midoriya was still so far out of reach and had been *so close to...*

Better not to think of it. Not until he could see him whole and in one piece.

The quirked computer had taken well to his interface. Already it plotted lines of likely positions, interpolating the trajectory and incomplete data into something that gave Nedzu the feeling of control. They'd split the villains into three vehicles, leaving Uraraka to bring the child back herself. They couldn't risk anyone knowing where he'd gone.

It felt strange to have gotten this far. By capturing *one man* they'd pulled the pin on the grenade, and now all that was left was the cleanup. It felt too... simple.

Disappointing.

"...Giran," came Aizawa's voice. Nedzu's ears perked up. They were only halfway back to UA.

"I thought you were out of town," Midoriya said . *"On vacation."*

"No rest for the wicked, Mr. Deku," Giran said. *"City wide chaos with no organized heroes? I'd be a fool to ignore it."*

Of course the world just kept turning, didn't it?

"What do you want?" Aizawa asked.

"I'm afraid I have some unfinished business with Mr Nagami here," Giran drawled. *"I came to take him off your hands."*

"I told you your victory was temporary," Blackout crowed. Was Giran really still going to work for Blackout? Nedzu didn't think he'd be keen to reinstate the shadow architect of the last five years, but...

"So just business then?" Midoriya asked.

"Forgive me, I misspoke," Giran said. *"This is really more of a personal interest."*

Ah. Blackout's days were *numbered.* Nedzu should feel bad about it.

(He didn't)

But they still needed Blackout. Midoriya's sight depended on having him in their custody, and Nedzu was not eager to lose track of him.

"I'm afraid we can't let you take him," Midoriya said. Giran tutted and the fur on Nedzu's neck rose.

"That's not really one of the options," Giran said. *"There are two; the first is that you let us leave unchallenged and in turn, you go on your way unscathed. The second is that I call my friends over and we take him after an unpleasant fight. Unpleasant for you, that is. In case it wasn't clear."*

Of the three heroes, only Aizawa was in any shape to keep fighting. Bakugou was exhausted and Midoriya was shot, even if they would make a solid attempt. No, a fight wasn't viable. Nedzu didn't know who Giran might have with him, but the man wasn't big on *chance* for all his love of gambling.

"You can't seriously be thinking of negotiating with this villain?" Bakugou said, distant. If Nedzu didn't do something soon, he was going to lose more than Blackout.

"Bakugou," Aizawa said in warning.

"No, sensei, he-"

"I think negotiating is an excellent idea," Nedzu chirped. He forced the high sing-song tones of a human in an easy going mood, free to let his tail wind tightly and nervously around the arm of the chair, unseen.

His last negotiation with Giran had gone well. Reminding Giran that Nedzu was involved would hopefully give their side of the equation more weight.

"Is that the rat?" Giran asked, gleeful.

If Nedzu could stand a whole conversation with the man.

"It's me!" Nedzu said. "And we are more invested in keeping custody of Blackout than you might imagine. Deku, for one, would benefit."

Giran did not care for such ideals as justice or even ethics. But self-interest? That he could relate to.

"He's been doing well enough, even blind," Giran said. *"He makes a hell of an underdog. Very good for business, if you know what I mean."*

Did the man care for anything more than money?

"Be that as it may, we have a vested personal interest in Mr. Nagami. It would do you well not to underestimate my students even now," Nedzu said. Better to blow past the implied threat and remind him of the last time Giran had underestimated him.

"Then perhaps we can come to some sort of arrangement. It doesn't matter to me whether Deku regains his sight or not. I only need Mr. Nagami," Giran said.

"You don't speak for me," Blackout growled. *"I will never-"*

"And it's not like I'm asking for his whole operation. You still have the others," Giran said.

Nedzu really hoped he wasn't referring to the kid. He was sure, however, that if Giran knew about the kid, he'd hardly be taking the time to indulge in personal revenge.

"And Deku?" Nedzu asked, because Midoriya would never ask for himself.

"If I get him to return Deku's sight, I leave with him. No resistance," Giran said.

And there it was. The ethical dilemma. The choice between self and duty. The slippery slope of what is right and what is deserved. Nedzu knows, though, that's not how the world works.

And 'ethics' owes him a little.

"Agreed," Nedzu said. He could make this decision for them. He just hoped that Midoriya would forgive him.

(That he wouldn't blame himself)

"Nedzu..." Aizawa growled.

"Eraserhead," Nedzu snapped, practiced authority in his voice. For a moment he thought the man wouldn't listen. Losing Aizawa's respect would be a heavy blow, but there was no other choice

Nedzu would make.

Aizawa gave in with a sigh. *"Alright."*

What followed was the most serious and ethically unsound game of patty cake Nedzu had ever heard. Presumably, some dose of trigger was exchanged and... applied. Blackout was vocal in his protests until Giran smacked him with his quirk and then convinced the confused man that this was his path to freedom.

Izuku tried to argue with Nedzu, but Nedzu remained firm.

And then there was a pained gasp.

"Pleasure doing business," Giran said. Bakugou was yelling threats as the door slammed shut

"Can you see?" Aizawa asked.

"Is he alright?" Nedzu asked.

"It hurts," Izuku said. An explosion sounded from outside the vehicle. *"Too bright."*

"Bakugou," Aizawa admonished.

"It wasn't me!"

"Get us out of here," Aizawa said.

"We shouldn't have done that," Midoriya said, voice tight with pain. *"Dealing with Giran... it isn't worth it."*

It was worth keeping his students alive.

"We weren't actually in much of a position to negotiate," Aizawa reasoned. *"It was Nedzu's call."*

"Fuck negotiating!" Bakugou slammed a hand on the wheel.

"Nedzu, please tell me there's a plan to get him back. Please tell me we didn't just... let him go so that I could see again," Midoriya pleaded.

Nedzu froze. That was... exactly what he'd done.

"Giran's going to learn about the kid," Midoriya said. *"And when he's done with Blackout there will be nothing left."*

"We will protect the kid," Nedzu said.

He said nothing of Blackout.

~The following autumn~

When Izuku and Shouto had been married, it had been early enough in his career of scandalous romances that they had been allowed the use of a shrine. Now, Shouto was banned from any church or shrine within a day's travel of the city for the purposes of a wedding.

Bad luck , some of them had said. *An utter lack of respect,* said others.

It's never worth the cleanup, said the rest.

Nedzu, and UA by extension, had no such concerns. And so the wedding congregation found themselves arranged in a lush forest clearing, surrounded by turning leaves and cleverly obscured battle scarred terrain. At the front was a glittering stage. It was so bright Izuku had a hard time distinguishing any particular feature, but the overall impression was *rainbows* .

His vision had never fully recovered from the laser damage. Sections were blank and silvery and his focus was shot, though one eye was better than the other. The glasses helped, but they only went so far. The wedding invitation had been a real test, as he'd been unable to tell how much was holographic garnish and how much was his brain trying to bend the words into something recognizable.

Beside him, his mother sobbed.

Izuku wrapped an arm around her gently, squeezing her. "It hasn't even started yet," he said.

"It's just so b-b-beautiful!" she cried, breath shuddering. "And he just looks s-s-s-so handsome!" she wailed.

"Who?" Izuku asked, squinting at the stage.

Just rainbows .

"Aoyama," she said. "Up there at the front."

Izuku could not for the life of him pick him out. "His outfit must blend in with the stage too much," Izuku said, tilting his head. The rainbows spun with him.

"What stage?" his mom asked, dabbing at her eyes.

"The... sparkles?" Izuku asked.

"That's just his outfit, dear," his mother said. "It's... very wide?"

"He's wearing *all of that?!"*

"And so handsomely too," his mother sniffled.

Izuku had been told long ago that his opinions on fashion were... invalid. So he refrained from comment. The rainbows were kind of pretty, though.

"Deku!" Ochako called, falling into the seat beside him. "I found you!"

"Ochako, you're *late* ," Izuku hissed.

"No, you're lucky I'm here at all," Ochako said. "I think Shouto tried to send me to the 'B' site, but I found Tsu and upgraded."

Shouto had been... paranoid in his instruction for attendees. Izuku, well used to the runaround, had skipped the riddles by going right to the viable venues and narrowing it down from there. From what he could tell, there had been a possibility of five different locations on the invitations. Izuku had just gone with the place he thought Shouto was most likely to show up.

"How do you know this is an upgrade?" Izuku asked. "They might all be decoys."

"Tsu got *menu options* ," Ochako whispered. "Even if this isn't the actual wedding I'm going to get fed."

"Well, if Shouto doesn't show up I hope *someone* gets married," his mother said, nudging him in the ribs with her elbow.

"Mom!" Izuku squeaked. "Why are you like this?"

"What? Can't a mother have hope for her son?" she asked. "Ochako honey, you haven't been married for a while, do you-"

"Nope!" Ochako cut her off. "I'm here for the food, not romance."

"It's not romantic! It's *manipulative* ," Izuku said.

"Can't blame a mother for trying," his mom said, completely unrepentant.

"Isn't it against some code of ethics to set people up at a wedding?" Izuku whined.

"More like expected," Ochako said, the backstabbing traitor. Ochako pinched his cheek upon seeing his scowl.

"See? Besides, Shouto's weddings are practically semi-annual events," his mom said. "If I'm going to marry you off, this is the best place to do it."

"Who's getting married?" Toru said, out of nowhere. Izuku jumped. His mother was pressed in tighter beside him as Toru leaned over to prod Izuku.

"Toru, we are literally at the Todoroki-Aoyama wedding," Izuku sighed.

"That's not a guarantee of anything," Toru said.

"Toru, dear, have you considered-"

"Mom! Please!" Izuku interrupted. Toru was a wild card. He might end up married if he wasn't careful about his mother’s aggressive matchmaking. Shouto's weddings tended to have an intoxicating effect on the attendees. Many regrettable decisions had been made, even before the wine.

He didn't put it past them to find a way around the 'mutual agreement'.

"What's wrong? Toru is cute!" his mom said.

"I *am* !" Toru agreed.

Izuku let his head fall into his hands. Hopefully something dramatic would happen soon and distract everyone.

The crowd hushed as there was a tinkling of... bells? It was hard to tell as the noise was quiet and blended with the whisper of the crowd. Izuku became aware of a soft flute being played as though from a great distance, and the beat of a drum no louder than footsteps.

Izuku turned in his seat, along with everyone else. At the edge of the forest, interrupting the soft shadows, stood a brilliant figure in white. The stiff posture and splash of red convinced him that

Shouto actually had shown up.

Oh thank god.

Shouto took a stately step forward in time to the ethereal music. Izuku couldn't tell where the music was coming from, but he was put in mind of a play. Everything but the stage and the actors fell away. His mom renewed her sniffling as she gushed about how proud he looked and Izuku had to blink rapidly to keep his own tears from falling.

Suddenly there was a roar from the forest and a column of flame leapt into being that put the fall foliage to shame. Shouto spun as dark figures spilled out of the trees, surrounding him. Izuku's chair fell back as he stood, ready to defend.

Shouto was still a fugitive, after all. His battle with Hawks had, in Kacchan's words, made things worse.

"Shouto!" Endeavor bellowed, cutting through the confused murmur of the crowd. Shouto froze in place, hands raised in defense, though no quirk was in evidence.

"You are under arrest, Scandal!" one of the men announced. "You are surrounded, there's nowhere for you to run!"

A blur of red in the sky announced Hawks arrival and Izuku's breath caught. His mother's hand was squeezing his elbow and he had to fight the instinct to tear away. What could he even do, now? Should he even do anything? Ochako stood stiffly beside him, as torn with indecision as he was.

Why did everything always go so wrong?

Half a year was nowhere near enough to fix the damage Blackout had done, but they'd started. Without all their strategies being cut off at the knees by a shadowy mastermind, they were rebuilding. Hitoshi had had his name cleared with testimony from the kid, and Ochako had fudged her way through with a combination of reasonable doubt and blackmail. Shouto had chosen to work from the shadows instead of sheltering from the top. His work was valuable, but had only made his arrest more desirable to the people clinging to power.

This wedding, though. Everyone here would be complicit with harboring a fugitive (a traitor, some tried to argue). And so many here were so vital to the rebuilding that needed to happen. Izuku itched to stand by Shouto, but when it came down to it...

He'd prioritize the rescue. Already, evacuation plans spun through his head. He went to turn to Ochako, to coordinate, when Shouto started laughing.

That was not Shouto's laugh .

'Shouto' relaxed from his fighting stance, hands falling to his sides. His shoulders shook with laughter even as Endeavor stormed forward.

"Sorry, sorry!" 'Shouto' said, hands rising in surrender. "Je n'essaie pas de pieger. I didn't mean for my little drama to cause so much trouble."

Confused silence met this pronouncement. Izuku felt a headache start as Aoyama Yuuga's voice distinctly came out of 'Shouto'.

"You were not invited, after all," Yuuga said, reaching one hand up to his hair. A quick tug that revealed a blond head of hair and an indecent amount of sparkles. Izuku, like many of the guests,

turned their head to look up front at the sparkly mass they had assumed was Yuuga.

The figure continued to stand there serenely.

At least, Izuku assumed so. There were a lot of rainbows. And sparkles.

"What is the meaning of this," Endeavor demanded. Hawks was quick to join him. Yuuga did not back down, instead just sparkled more fiercely. "Where is my son?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," Yuuga said mildly. His voice carried. "But I wasn't going to let his whereabouts interfere with the celebration of our love!"

"I don't believe this," Endeavor said darkly. At Izuku's elbow, Ochako was nervously chuckling.

"If you're Aoyama, then who is that?" asked Hawks, pointing up the aisle to the other person.

"I'm still getting paid for this, aren't I?" the figure called in a worried voice.

A horribly familiar voice.

Izuku bit his tongue.

"Absolutely, my darling! We'll have this cleared up in no time!" Yuuga called.

"Is that Sero?" Ochako whispered to Izuku. Izuku bit his tongue harder.

"Show your face!" Endeavor roared, storming up the aisle towards the glittering cloud of... gown? Izuku assumed it was a gown. The logistics of the amount of material needed for a traditional outfit that was that big was...

Well. It was in line with things Shouto had pulled off before.

At the front, gasps were heard as the figure pulled back their veil. Or hat. Izuku couldn't tell.

"Is that Aoyama?" guests whispered. "There are two of them!" others cried. Endeavor was steaming up towards the glittering figure, who seemed to be shuffling back as quickly as their outfit would let them.

"Who are you? Show yourself, you-" Endeavor said. The figure was frantically pulling at something on their head as the steaming man approached until...

A shock of black hair and a pale face. Endeavor stopped in his tracks.

"Seriously, getting paid still, right?" the figure, now with Sero's face, said.

In the distance outside the forest, a pillar of fire roared into life. Endeavor faltered. Turned.

"I don't know what you're playing at," Endeavor said to Yuuga, who had trailed after him. "I don't know what you're getting out of this... this... shameful deceit," he said.

"My guests expected a spectacle," Yuuga said coolly. "I wasn't going to disappoint them, even if Shouto wasn't available."

"This is *disgraceful* , and the only good thing to come out of this is that you will never be part of my family. If you are wise, you will stop this farce before I *sue you for libel* ," Endeavor growled.

"Excuse you, I am very graceful," Yuuga said. "And you weren't invited."

"It's my son's wedding," Endeavor ground out.

Like that had ever mattered.

"Do you see your son here?" Yuuga asked. Endeavor glared at the prismatic figure still held in place with pounds of fabric. 'Sero' waved nervously.

Endeavor shook his head.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves. We're leaving," Endeavor said. And with a blast of flame he did just that. Hawks shrugged at Yuuga, who waved cheerfully, and the rest of the operation sheepishly melted back into the forest.

Izuku kept very still.

Shouto was terrible at many things, but they did discover one very drunk night that he could mimic Sero's voice.

Perfectly.

Shouto had vowed to find a use for the... talent... but Izuku. Izuku...

Izuku should not have challenged him. There was still a slight possibility that the figure up front was *actually* Sero, but Izuku knew better.

Yuuga sighed and clapped his hands.

"Well!" he announced to the crowd. "While not completely unexpected, that was rather unpleasant!"

"So, is there going to be a wedding?" Izuku's mother asked, hold still tight on Izuku's arm.

"There's going to be disaster," Izuku said.

At the front of the assembly, a tall dark man rose from behind the shimmering fabric piled around. He said nothing, but the assembly quieted with a trained snap of attention.

"Oh, there's Mr Aizawa," his mom said, wiping her eyes with an ever present tissue.

Aizawa pressed a hand to his ear before nodding. "Clear," he called out. A familiar white shape popped up from his collar. Nedzu theatrically clapped his paws from atop his perch.

"Friends! Family!" Nedzu cried out, "Minions!"

Izuku couldn't help but take the last one personally.

"We are gathered here together on this happy occasion to celebrate the marriage of two very special young people!" Nedzu said. "Mr. Aoyama, if you would kindly complete your procession and join your intended we can begin."

Yuuga promptly ran back to the edge of the forest as the atmospheric music started up again. The crowd was on edge, but Izuku's classmates were used to rolling with the punches. You took peace where you could get it, and soon everyone had righted their chairs and Izuku's mother was back to sniffling in her seat.

There was an expectant pause as Yuuga reached the place he'd been when they'd first been interrupted. When nothing happened the crowd cheerfully applauded. Yuuga bowed without breaking step and soon stood before Aizawa and Nedzu, clasping hands with the shimmering figure lost in rainbows and sparkles.

"Is he going to marry Sero?" Ochako whispered.

"If we're lucky," Izuku muttered. He would feel slightly bad for Sero getting sucked into the drama, but if he didn't know the score by now he hadn't been paying attention.

"Now, before we begin, I'd like to start by saying-" Nedzu began, only to be interrupted by a massive explosion from the forest to the left.

"I OBJECT!" Kacchan came screaming in, landing on one knee and fist in the center of the aisle. He was flanked by his employees, who all seemed to be wearing disheveled tuxedos. there was a stunned silence as they stood, an intimidating wedge of pro-heroes.

Yuuga coughed.

"Hey, are you dressed up as me?" the tuxedo wearing Sero said, breaking formation to get a closer look at Yuuga and 'Sero'. "Am *I* getting married?"

He sounded honest to god excited.

"Oh my god," Kacchan said, "No."

"You're early," 'Sero' said, in Shouto's typical deadpan. The crowd gasped obligingly as Shouto pulled off wig and mask.

"No shit, candy cane," Kacchan spat. "Hurry up and get to the good part."

The 'good part' for many years was the traditional roasting of the groom, a tradition Kacchan had started after not being invited to the first three weddings. He'd wait for the 'reason these two should not be wed' and then would enthusiastically tear apart Shouto's attire and character until someone snapped and punched him.

It was... lively.

Nedzu regarded the wedding party serenely, and from nowhere pulled a sheaf of papers. "Alright, then it's best we get started!" he said. "In Mr. Todoroki's long history of marriage and divorce, he has learned many things I'm sure. You will agree it highlights the advantages of a practical education! People learn so much better by doing, these days, than by merely reading, and I think Mr. Todoroki will bring a great deal of experience to his new venture in love. It is important to be passionate about the subject matter, as I'm sure an audience of hero hopefuls can attest. It is why here at UA we value bringing practical..."

Oh. Izuku had forgotten about Nedzu's... speeches. He slumped in his chair, glad to at least be sitting for this.

This was going to be a long wedding.

Izuku and Hitoshi stumbled back to his apartment at some indecent hour of the morning. Hitoshi, gentleman that he was, had promptly taken over Izuku's bed, leaving Izuku to fret over whether he should try to wedge himself between Hitoshi and the wall, or give up and take the couch.

He wasn't even sure why Hitoshi was here. He'd just... followed him home, still singing drinking songs he'd started at the wedding.

Oh well. Izuku could probably do with a cup of tea to calm his nerves. Something decaffeinated and unspiked.

He'd lost his jacket somewhere between Kacchan showing up and Shouto's second daring escape from the authorities. The wedding reception had taken place on the run, a pub crawl where the wedding guests that weren't swift on their feet were caught for questioning. He had one shoe left, and dearly hoped there wouldn't be a Cinderella situation in his near future.

Izuku glared at the kettle as it heated. Pouring tea was an exercise in frustration, and right now he was definitely not at his best. He stacked three towels under the mug as a preventative measure.

He nearly dropped the whole thing when he made his way into his living room; someone was sitting there already.

"Shouto? What are you doing here?" Izuku asked, identifying the tall figure on his couch. Shouto shuffled aside so Izuku could sit beside him. Izuku only stubbed his toe once on the way over.

"Do I need a reason to come visit my friend?"

"It's your wedding night," Izuku chuckled. "Morning?"

"Aoyama is fine with it. Nobody will suspect a thing," Shouto said.

"Aren't you an Aoyama now too?" Izuku said, yawning.

"I'm a fugitive," Shouto said. "I change my name every week."

Izuku leaned back, making himself comfortable on the couch.

"The world is going to miss out on the Aoyama-Todoroki power couple," Izuku said.

"Oh, I wouldn't say they're going to miss out. Aoyama has plans," Shouto said. "He's got this whole star-crossed lovers thing going on. It's going to be fantastic."

"It's going to drive your father up the wall."

"Yes," Shouto said with satisfaction.

Izuku carefully set the bundle of towels and tea cup on the coffee table.

"How are your eyes?" Shouto asked bluntly.

"My eyesight is still bad enough that I can't drive or fly a plane," Izuku said.

"Could you do those things before?"

"Not the point. The point is, my career as a hero is over. The commission won't renew my license. Officially. No take-backsies."

"So what are you going to do?"

"That is the question, isn't it? Tsu said... well. I didn't want to listen at the time, but Tsu said that you need a backup option. Something to do after the hero work, because hero work isn't sustainable," Izuku said thoughtfully.

Nedzu said you just had to do what you wanted (and by you, he meant what *Nedzu* wanted). And then pushed employment forms at him. Izuku made a game of not signing them. He wasn't sure why he didn't. Maybe because it felt too easy.

(He wasn't sure he didn't work for Nedzu already)

"You only ever wanted to be a hero," Shouto said.

"I know, right? But I think it's time to take a step back and... re-evaluate. I just... What are you going to do, anyway? How long are you going to play fugitive?"

"There's work to be done that is simpler outside the law," Shouto said. "And it's interesting. There's a whole world out there you don't see as a hero, millions of tiny things you miss."

"Are you going to take a villain name?"

"I'm not doing anything different. I've been Scandal the whole time, I'm Scandal still. It's everyone else's perceptions that have changed."

"Huh. That's... that's really what it comes down to, isn't it. How everyone else sees you," Izuku said. "And how you see yourself."

"It's always been like that. It's what makes you special; you see the past all that. You *make* us better by *seeing* us as better."

"Shouto..." Izuku wiped at his eyes. "You can't just break into someone's apartment and say things like that."

"I'm a villain, I do what I want," Shouto said. He bumped his shoulder against Izuku, in silent support.

They sat for a quiet early morning eternity, patiently waiting for Izuku to stop crying. Izuku eventually felt something like resolve curl in his chest.

"You know... I think maybe I should get a desk job," Izuku said finally.

"Really? I would have thought you would take Nedzu up on his teaching position," Shouto said.

"I thought I was going to, too... but. I think... I think I need to be realistic," Izuku said.

"That does not sound like you at all," Shouto said.

"Shut up! What I mean is, Nedzu is already taking care of the education side of things. He's going to need allies outside the school too. Someone needs to be there for the kids after they graduate and I think... I think I might go for a position in the Hero Commission."

"Izuku, no," Shouto said. "Overthrowing the Hero Commission from the inside is not a realistic desk job," Shouto said. The smile on his face belied the warning in his words.

"Nobody said anything like that. *You have a wild imagination, Shouto,* " Izuku said, smiling back.

"You're impossible," Shouto said. "And I can't wait to see what you do."

- the end -

Chapter End Notes

Well what a wild ride! I hope everyone is ok after that. It was interesting to write and post, but i don't think I'll do it again. Next time, i write the whole thing before posting.

This story is complete! I don't think I will be coming back to it, but I have a more different idea for Izuku and Nedzu. We'll see if it becomes a whole thing or just a chapter or two. But for now, i take a break.

I hope you enjoyed it, and thank you for the encouragement along the way. I had fun!

End Notes

You guys are the best and it is a pleasure to share this story with you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!